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History Note

1962 recount involved two candidates for governor who were supporters of children with disabilities

by Luther Granquist

Two supporters of children with disabilities faced each other in the contested recount of the election for Minnesota governor in 1962. As a state senator in 1956, Elmer L. Andersen led a legislative commission that stated the "firm conviction" that children with disabilities should have an equal opportunity for education with every other child. The legislation proposed mandated education for all children with handicaps who were "educable." That law passed in 1957, years before Congress acted on this issue. Four years later, then-Governor Andersen also supported the first matching grants for community day activity centers. This occurred during the 1961 legislative session.

Andersen faced Karl Rolvaag for governor in 1962. In March 1963 the court that supervised the recount of the 1962 election ruled that DFLer Karl Rolvaag had defeated Andersen by 91 votes. The new governor also proved to be a friend of persons with mental retardation (as the developmentally disabled were described then) or mental illness in the state's institutions, particularly in the second half of his term. Leaders of the Association for Retarded Citizens (then ARC, now Arc) flew with him on his state plane to meetings around the state to garner support for increased staffing in the institutions and increased funding for special education and day activity centers, actions the Minnesota Legislature approved in 1965.

Rolvaag presented a Bill of Rights for the Retarded at the Arc convention in June 1966 and at a conference he sponsored later that year. He proclaimed that people with mental retardation should not have to live in "huge, ugly, crowded dormitories and dayrooms." He decried wards that were still "crowded, smelly, and understaffed." He urged the Arc members to join with him in a "massive public demand for a change." Rolvaag did not have a chance to send his proposals to the 1967 Legislature. He lost the election that year to Harold Levander.

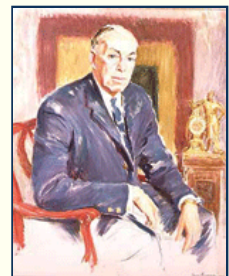
In 1957, Andersen and his colleagues stopped short of mandating special education for children deemed "trainable" but not "educable," in large part because some educators said training these children was not the work of the schools. Rolvaag tried but failed to expand special education to include these children. But the day activity programs that Andersen and he supported demonstrated that these children could learn and should be in school. In 1971, after vigorous advocacy by the Arc, the Minnesota Legislature finally mandated special education for these "trainable" children.

The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, www.mnddc.org or www.mncdd.org and www.partnersinpolicymaking.com ■

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Gov. Elmer L. Andersen



Gov. Karl Rolvaag

Access Press
(651) 644 - 2133
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Tim Benjamin
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