



mission
empower

Educational Advocacy for the Inclusion of Youth

Annual Report 2008-09





Jill Hrinda-Patten
Executive Director

Letter from our Executive Director

What an exciting time for this organization! While our focus and our mission have not changed, our name has. We are proud to announce that EAIY is now known as **Mission Empower**.

We believe that **Mission Empower** more actively expresses our passion to educate and support the whole community to be inclusive for all. We have also unveiled our new logo, which better portrays our true belief that all youth—with or without a disability—can follow their dreams and reach for the stars.

So why is our mission of integrating all youth with disabilities into their community so vital? Because one out of four individuals in this country has a disability. And remember, you don't have to be born with a disability—anyone could acquire a disability at any time.

Just imagine you are at work and a virus fries your hard drive. You do not have the ability to fix it, so you are immediately labeled *computer illiterate*, and you must always work in a separate room with other "computer illiterate" people. That is exactly what is happening to our young people with disabilities. In fact, when it comes to rates of inclusion across America, Pennsylvania ranks in the bottom third.

Inclusion throughout school is the foundation that launches youth for productive work and citizenship as adults. If youth are segregated, they will not gain the necessary tools for employment. This reality is reflected by the 2007 census data unemployment rate of 52% for people with disabilities.

For inclusion to be truly realized, **Mission Empower** actively partners with the community by providing disability awareness outreach activities. In the past year, our volunteers have presented at the Family Fun Day of ARC of Erie County, four assemblies at Harborcreek Junior High School, and with the JoAnna Connell Girl Scout Troupe. Additionally, we have conducted educational rights and advocacy strategies presentations to the Northwestern Pennsylvania Autism Society of America and at the Autism in our Community event sponsored by Kaleidoscope.

Research clearly shows that everyone benefits when people with and without disabilities learn, play and work together. We are a stronger community when true diversity is the norm and high expectations for all prevail.

—Jill Hrinda-Patten

Our Mission

Through education, advocacy and empowerment we seek total integration of all youth with disabilities into all aspects of life and their community.

Year in Review

Mission Empower has experienced a pressing demand for educational advocacy from the families of Erie County. We have assisted 40 families this past year in advocating for the needs of their children.

25% resulted in a more inclusive placement and curriculum setting for the student.

10% resulted in an increase in rigorous curriculum without change in placement.

30% resulted in securing necessary supplementary aids and services for the student to be successful without being removed to a more segregated setting.

15% are still in progress.

15% are requests for information concerning education rights.

5% are miscellaneous disability information requests.

The Year Ahead

Mission Empower will carry out three key points of our strategic plan in the coming year:

- Train volunteer parent advocates for educational advocacy
- Develop the youth mentoring/leadership program
- Expand the disability awareness program



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Isaac's Story

"Isaac was in second grade this past year. He has such a big smile and is so caring and loving, yet he also has



a difficult time controlling his anger and rage. Isaac was given a diagnosis of emotional disturbance and ADHD. In addition, he

struggles with reading and writing so he has a learning disability. Due to his difficulty with anger, he was placed in a separate room with other kids with anger issues at the beginning of the year, before I worked with Jill and *Mission Empower*.

"Through Jill, I realized that it was definitely not the right choice for my son, or any other child. A general education teacher taught this room and even though the kids were completely segregated, had a shorter day, and rode a separate bus, they were considered fully included. Through diligent work with Jill and *Mission Empower*, this class is now attending a full day of school, and will be taught by a special education teacher. The work is still not done, but I am confident in the abilities of the *Mission Empower* team and am secure that they are continuing their support and instruction. Without them, my beautiful, smiling boy, Isaac, would be frowning a lot more than he does now. He really disliked that room. I am so thankful for the knowledge and support from *Mission Empower*."

—Michelle Heverly

Our Donors

Educators Club (\$1000+)

Voices For Independence
Kirk Patten and Jill Hrinda-Patten

Empowerment Club (\$500-\$999)

Erie Insurance Inc.

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Michelle Heverly
Angela and Johnny Johnson

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Mission Empower strives through education, advocacy and empowerment to integrate the current generation of all youth with disabilities to be fully included, productive, participatory citizens of their community. We have developed a three-pronged approach for promoting inclusion through education advocacy, youth leadership/mentoring, and community education programs.

Our Board of Directors

Vanessa Kefauver *President/Secretary*

B.A. in Criminal Justice, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania; Information and Referral Specialist for five years at Voices For Independence; and a life-long advocate who was included throughout her school career.

Anna Fischer *Treasurer*

More than 20 years experience as a bookkeeper/staff accountant; member of the Northwestern Pennsylvania Autism Society of America; mother of three children; advocated for own son who has aspergers syndrome.

Patricia Ziegler *Interim Director*

Personal Care Attendant; mother of six children; advocated for educational rights of two of her children who have disabilities.

Angela Johnson *Director*

Lifelong advocate and founder of **The RECC Center** Project (**R**elaxation, **E**xercise, **C**reativity, **C**ommunity)—The One-Stop-Shop For The Mind, Body and Soul.

Johnny Johnson *Director*

Author/historian who owns Living History and Helping You... Helping Me; more than 35 years experience as a school teacher; in retirement, he has developed and implemented youth mentoring and tutoring programs for the City of Erie School District.

Tina Riazi *Introductory Director*

Child Care Assistant at YMCA and lifelong advocate.

If you would like to donate to Mission Empower, please contact us at **(814) 825-0788** or go to **www.eaiy.org/donate**.



Educational Advocacy for the Inclusion of Youth

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Mission Empower is extremely grateful to the following:

- Committed volunteers who give their valuable time, resources and creativity
- The Nonprofit Partnership and ID Video Productions—ErieAlity.com for the DVD of the story of the founding of Mission Empower
- Erie Capacity Building Collaborative and The Nonprofit Partnership for providing capacity building classes
- Erie Capacity Building Collaborative for a grant to expand our technology and marketing capacity
- Erie Community Foundation for a grant to purchase computer equipment for educating parents and the community in accomplishing the mission of inclusion
- Disability Advocacy Strategic Hub for facilitating the Mission Empower board in developing our strategic plan
- Mentch Consulting for designing our web site, www.eaiy.org, a resource for the entire community in promoting inclusion
- Highmark Corporation for sponsoring the "Walk for a Healthy Community," our largest fundraiser to date
- Rob Kocur, Artistic Director of the United We Stand Theater Troupe (UWSTT), who assisted in the creation of the school assembly skits for the community education program
- Wegman's West and Peach Street, Sam's Club, Koldrock and Stroehman's Bakery for donations of food and beverages that made our first annual picnic a success
- Erie Health Spa, Gilbert's Natural Hair Care Center, Wendy's, Romolo's, Junior's Last Laugh, Two Friends Italian Market, Family First Sports Park, Splash Lagoon and the Erie Bay Hawks or incentives for the Highmark "Walk for a Healthy Community"