

Language is Key

You may say “one of the mentally retarded students in my middle school band” or “one of the middle school students with an intellectual disability” to describe a specific student. These statements have very different connotations and you might feel uncomfortable hearing these words or even reading them on the page. The two statements have very different meanings.

Americans with Disabilities Act

In 1990, the *Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)* was passed and with it many forms of discrimination against people with disabilities were outlawed. Although the forms of discrimination were eliminated, the use of discriminatory language still existed.

Rosa’s Law

On October 5, 2010, President Barack Obama signed into law S. 2781, more commonly known as *Rosa’s Law*. This law changes the language used in many federal statutes from “mental retardation” to “intellectual disability.” For many Americans with disabilities, this promotes dignity and respect and helps to eliminate hurtful and negative labels.

Rosa’s Law began its journey in Maryland, with a then 9 year old girl, Rosa Marcellino, who has Down Syndrome. She, along with her family, worked with their state representative to pass legislation in Maryland to eliminate the word “retarded” from official state use. As a society, we have come a long way from the use of insensitive terms, but over time, the word “retarded” grew to have a derogatory tone and Rosa wanted to eliminate it from everyday use and move into a new era.

Pennsylvania, Governor Tom Corbett signed State Senator Andy Dinniman’s *Words Do Matter* bill on December 19, 2011. Pennsylvania now joins the growing number of states, including Massachusetts and New Jersey, in eliminating the “R” word from official documents. County agencies and schools districts have begun to update department titles, websites and documents to reflect the change in language.

Words Do Hurt!

Language plays a crucial role in how people with intellectual disabilities are perceived and treated in society. The term “mental retardation” is not technically derogatory, but can evoke hurtful feelings based on context. The term “intellectual disabilities” is more socially sensitive.

“Person first language” is a more respectful way of using language and puts the human being first, before

the disability. One example is saying a “student with autism” rather than an “autistic student.” This language is not just about being politically correct, but it is about helping others to understand that students are students first and are not defined by their disability. Teachers and administrators need to be aware and recognize the student for himself or herself first. The use of this language honors the student as an individual and a person. Using person first language can help to change the attitudes of those around us including both educators and students.

With the passing of legislation, replacing the use of “mental retardation” with “intellectual disabilities” and using “person first language,” it is more important than ever that we promote positive language when speaking to others about our students with special needs!

References

Person First Language

<http://www.disabilityisnatural.com/>

The Library of Congress: Rosa’s Law Bill Text

<http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c111:S.2781:>

Rosa’s Law: ABC’s Person of the Week

<http://abcnews.go.com/WN/person-week-marcellinos-celebrate-signing-rosas-law/story?id=11823803#.TzHB0VwV26o>

Words Do Matter (PA)

<http://www.senatordinniman.com/governor-signs-dinniman%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%9Cwords-do-matter%E2%80%9D-bill-into-law>



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A word from the Special Learner Coordinator...

Do you have a story to share? Please send it to Jeff Cooper at jcooper@colonialsd.org. As the PMEA Special Learners Coordinator, I’m very much interested in increasing the awareness and dialogue regarding special needs students in our music classrooms. If you are a *Facebook* user, you can be part of our *PMEA Special Learners Forum*. After logging in to your existing Facebook account, simply go to our www.pmea.net site and, in the left column, click the Special Learners link. You can also contact me at jcooper@colonialsd.org with any questions or suggestions for future articles. I’m looking forward to hearing from you.



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