In 1992, Martin Kaufman and Jeptha Greer retired within a couple of months of each other following long stints in two of the most important positions in special education. Kaufman, as director of the Division of Innovation and Development (DID) in the Office of Special Education Programs, and Greer, as executive director of The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), were remarkably effective administrators. Although all of us have benefited from their leadership, their behind-the-scenes maneuvering has remained largely invisible and unappreciated by many.

Kaufman

Before becoming director of DID in 1982, Kaufman held a number of posts in the former Bureau of Education for the Handicapped, including branch chief of several divisions. As director of DID, Kaufman engineered increasingly large appropriations from Congress for special education R & D at a time when Congressional support for DID’s general education counterpart, the Office of Educational Research and Development (OERI), remained steady or decreased. In 1991, DID awarded $31.6 million worth of grants on some 160 projects. In the same year, the larger and higher profile OERI had a research budget of $50 million (McKenna, 1992). And while OERI’s resources traditionally have been divided among many autonomous national centers and laboratories, depriving OERI of a say in how federal monies should be spent (Sroufe & Knutson, 1992), Kaufman kept control of DID’s monies. Building on a tradition established by his predecessors, Jim Moss and Gary McDaniels, Kaufman and his staff, with input from researchers, practitioners, and families of children with disabilities, developed more than 20 federal initiatives in 10 years. These included initial career awards, student-initiated grants, and small grants, which in aggregate have helped develop a national R & D capacity in special education, expanded the professional knowledge base, and improved programs and services.

Kaufman’s success both at winning relatively large Congressional appropriations and in maintaining control over how they would be invested was due to tireless and masterful behind-the-scenes machinations. Unlike the OERI leadership, which developed few alliances with Washington-based professional organizations, and fewer still connections to grass-root constituencies, Kaufman’s contacts were legion, his powers of persuasion legendary. He talked incessantly about the importance of R & D with the likes of the American Speech and Hearing Association, National Association of State Directors of Special Education, Learning Disabilities Association, CEC, and The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps. Often providing lobbyists of these and other groups with pivotal arguments and
key language, he time and again shaped the effective testimony that persuaded an often reluctant Congress to fund special education R & D.

According to close colleagues, several personal attributes contributed to Kaufman’s effectiveness. First, he has an unshakable, rock-bottom belief in the importance of research to practice, and an ability to communicate this belief to all kinds of people, including many skeptics on the Hill. Second, he is the quintessential New York City street fighter who loves a good fight. One associate said of Kaufman, “Guys whose jobs required them to go toe-to-toe with Marty hated it. They knew they were in for a bruising 15-rounder. He was like Frazier against Ali. Relentless. He’d just keep on coming, never would throw in the towel, regardless of the odds or how tough things got.” Finally, Kaufman is ebullient and affable. “People have a hard time not liking him,” said one DID staffer, “even when they know he has outmaneuvered them or is blowing smoke at them.”

An overarching goal of Kaufman’s has been to infuse researchers with a sense of community and a collective responsibility for improving outcomes for individuals with disabilities. One sees this in his pioneering efforts to guide collaboration across different research teams funded by the same federal initiative, such as with the Comprehensive School Model Projects. His strong support of the creation of CEC’s Division of Research is another example. But the most dramatic manifestation of his community-building spirit is the Annual Research Project Directors’ Meeting that he designed, developed, and has supported for the past 7 years.

Kaufman’s work to promote the importance and enhance the capacity of the special education research community is unparalleled. Researchers owe him much and must consider themselves fortunate that they had such an effective spokesperson in Washington for so many years.

Greer

Greer began his professional career as a teacher of students with mental retardation. He then became the first supervisor of programs for mentally challenged children in the Special District for the Education and Training of Handicapped Children in St. Louis County (Missouri), which, in turn, was followed by appointments as director of special education and then as assistant superintendent for supporting instructional services in the Dekalb County (Georgia) schools. In 1980, he became executive director of CEC.

Like many businesses hurt by the recession of President Reagan’s first administration, CEC was in dire financial straits when Greer took command. In the late 1970s, the organization had expanded on a number of fronts: There were new projects in program development and publishing, and additional staff had been hired. Also, a headquarters had just been constructed in Reston (Virginia), and loans for the building, as well as borrowing for the other ventures, were requiring paybacks with an exorbitant 18% to 20% interest.

At the same time that CEC’s operating costs were skyrocketing, its membership was plummeting. From 1978 to 1982, membership shrank from approximately 72,000 to 45,000. In 1982, its ratio of current assets to liabilities (or what money it had vs. the money it owed) was 1.0:2.1. It was 120 to 180 days behind in paying
its bills. Years later, Greer would confide that had a few major creditors called in their chips, CEC would have had to declare bankruptcy.

Greer's first task as executive director was to develop a financial strategy and sell it to CEC's major creditors; his second was to execute it. The money people bought his austerity plan and extended CEC additional loans and time. Through reductions in force and attrition, Greer orchestrated a one-third diminution of headquarters staff. He placed restrictions on staff's travel, terminated several costly publication projects, and, for a while, implemented an every-other-Friday furlough of all staff.

Throughout the ordeal, Greer worked unremittingly and stoically. But he was as compassionate and respectful as he was determined. According to a senior staffer, during the time of staff layoffs, nobody left CEC before Greer found him or her another job. When tough decisions had to be made, Greer made them, but he preferred the role of consensus builder and facilitator. He had obvious respect for his staff and encouraged them to work toward decisions that would be viewed by all as appropriate and fair. He was also selfless. During difficult meetings with the Board of Governors in the early 1980s, he never flinched from taking the heat. Later, as things began to improve and Greer received increasing praise, he typically would deflect it onto his staff.

All this, not surprisingly, earned Greer respect and loyalty among CEC staff. Even during the bleak early 1980s, morale at headquarters was high. People worked hard and were productive. Greer was admired not just because he was a competent, fair-minded, self-effacing administrator. Staff understood and appreciated his deep commitment to individuals with disabilities and their families, and his equally strong belief in the goodness of special educators. "He would deny to the death that he was a liberal," says one close associate, "but he really had great liberal values."

For the past 2 years, CEC has been operating in the black. In 1991, its ratio of current assets to liabilities was 1.28:1.0. Over 8 years, the organization has steadily built a $1 million reserve fund. Greer's prudent management has given CEC financial stability. He has also helped stabilize relations with the divisions, strengthened *Exceptional Children* and *Teaching Exceptional Children* by going outside headquarters to do business with university-based editors, and championed the growing importance of early childhood, technology, and multiculturalism. CEC's house is in order, thanks in large part to Jep Greer's quiet, effective leadership. The organization is ready to play a defining role in the 1990s.

References


(The journal welcomes letters from readers addressing editorials or articles. The editors reserve the right to choose which letters to publish and to reduce their length as dictated by considerations of journal space.)