

Tarheel Footprints in Health Care

Recognizing unusual and often unsung contributions of individual citizens who have made health care for North Carolinians more accessible and of higher quality

Connie Hawkins Children's Advocate



As the parent of a young son with significant learning, speech, and language disabilities, Johnson City, Tennessee native Connie Hawkins knew first-hand about the challenges of navigating the "special education maze." Her son Michael was one of the first students with disabilities to attend Davidson Elementary School, and Ms. Hawkins learned very early that the team approach was the best way to support her son and his educators. She recognized that she needed knowledge and skills to be Michael's best advocate. She also recognized that there were many other parents who needed those things as well.

Ms. Hawkins's passion and commitment for improving the life and education of own child led her to team up with another passionate parent, Frank Graziadei of Charlotte, and Dr. Richard White, a special education professor at UNCC. Together they conceptualized and established the Exceptional Children's Assistance Center (ECAC) a private nonprofit parent organization. Then named the Exceptional Children's Advocacy Center, ECAC began as an all-volunteer organization that served as the Parent Advisory Board for the Charlotte—Mecklenburg School System. By 1983, the board received its first Parent Training and Information (PTI) grant from the US Department of Education (DOE), Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and began serving nine North Carolina counties. In the late 1980s, with continued funding from OSEP, the program began serving the entire state.

As the executive director of ECAC, Ms. Hawkins's vision for a full-service parent center has seen the organization expand far beyond the boundaries of disability to include all children. As challenges or opportunities for growth present themselves, the first question Ms. Hawkins and ECAC's Board of Directors ask is "what is best for North Carolina's children?" With four offices geographically dispersed throughout the state and nearly 50 staff members, ECAC's programs serve children from birth to age 26. These offices responded to more than 50,000 requests for information last year from parents, families, educators, and other professionals. All services are provided to parents and families at no cost.

ECAC is not only home to one of the nation's oldest federally funded Parent Training and Information Centers, it is also home to multiple projects including the NC Title 1 Parent Information and Resource Center (PIRC), the NC Family to Family Health Information Center, and the Region 2 Parent Technical Assistance Center (PTAC) which provides technical assistance parent centers in eight other states and the District of Columbia. Under Ms. Hawkins's leadership, ECAC is the only Parent Center in the nation to have the combination of all four of these major federally funded projects. ECAC has a strong collaborative relationship with the North Carolina Department of Public Schools and works tirelessly with public school leaders to improve educational outcomes for all students.

Ms. Hawkins has developed a national and statewide reputation as a devoted advocate for the educational rights for students with and without disabilities. She is a well-known speaker and workshop presenter on topics related to special education, school reform, children with disabilities and special health care

continued on page 94

continued from page 92

needs and their families, and parent/professional collaboration, and was the original co-author of *Parents Together*, a manual for North Carolina parents of children with special needs. Ms. Hawkins has a degree in journalism from Queens College and continues her education through graduate courses in nonprofit management, special education, and law.

Ms. Hawkins currently sits on the advisory boards of the National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (NECTAC), the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC), the National Center on Education Outcomes (NCEO), and the National Center on Learning Disabilities. In North Carolina she actively participates in the NC DPI Superintendent's Parent Advisory Committee and the NC Special Needs Federation, and was heavily involved in the NC Continuous Improvement Monitoring Process. Additionally, she is a charter member of the NC School Improvement Commission and also participated in the NC Legislative Study Commission for Children with Special Needs.

I met Connie Hawkins in 1984 during an ECAC parent training workshop conducted at my daughter's school. When I had questions or concerns about her educational program, Connie and ECAC were there with the answers, support and encouragement our family needed to be effective partners with our daughter's teachers and other school staff members.

If you ever meet Connie Hawkins you won't forget her and she won't forget you. With her red hair, infectious laugh, and understanding Irish blue eyes, parents instantly know they are not alone in their journey and professionals know there is no one more committed to improving outcomes for children. During a recent evaluation of ECAC's services one parent said, "If it hadn't been for the support, encouragement, and knowledge I received from Connie Hawkins, my son would have never graduated from high school... and he's going to college this fall!" Ms. Hawkins deeply believes that parents are experts about their children and, when supported with knowledge and skills, they can become their child's best and most effective advocate.

And Michael? Michael is a grown man now and teaches English to college students in China—a far cry from the little boy who had few language skills for so many years.

*Contributed by
Mary LaCorte, assistant director of the Exceptional Children's Assistance Center,
and the director of ECAC's PTI Project.*