Stacie Jackson

A person holding a horse

Description automatically generated with low confidence

I was recently asked about my professional path to Early Intervention and beyond. I started teaching in 1991 in Va Beach City Schools in a Title I Kindergarten classroom.  This was back when Kindergarten classes were half-day, before inclusion, and class sizes were big!  I was fresh out of college and kept saying to Ruby, my saintly assistant, “don’t worry, I got this!”  Day 1 arrived, and the children just kept coming…64 in all! 31 in the morning, then a 45-minute break for lunch and planning, before the afternoon 33 kiddos arrived.  This was also before the birthday cut-off changed to Sept. 30, leaving us with children ranging in age, and need, from 4 yrs. 8 months – 6 yrs. Needless to say, without Ruby, I definitely “did not have this!”  Of my 64 children, I also had a total of 5 who had IEPs for what was then known as TMR and EMR, providing another assistant who floated with them in and out of my classroom.  I look back on this and think we did the absolute best we could with creative planning, individualizing, but always staying focused on what the children needed.  It always involved long hours, but they were some of the best hours spent with young children!

Fast forward 6 years and I finished my MS in Leadership at UVA and took a job in Greene County VA as an assistant principal between two buildings, K-2 and 3-5.  This was quite a change for me moving from a system with 75 elementary schools in Va Beach to having 2 elementary schools in Greene.  We didn’t even have a stoplight on Rt 33!  All the buses arrived with children in grades PK-12, starting at the elementary school and then driving down around the block, dropping students at the Primary School, and on to the Middle and High Schools. One of the absolute best things about working in a small school system was every teacher and administrator became a “jack of all trades”!  This experience offered me a tremendous opportunity to grow professionally as there were times the “other duties as assigned” in my contract was longer than the contract!  It was also my first introduction to 3-year-olds in preschool as we had a special education preschool classroom.  It was often my happy place, and I could go to that classroom at any point in the day and be greeted with smiles and welcoming arms.  When I walked in, one little guy announced from his wheelchair, “hey look, that lady got out of the box!” referring to the television mounted in the classroom where he saw me each morning with fifth grade students doing the morning announcements.

From Greene, my career continued in Frederick County, MD, as an elementary school principal.  I also married and had 2 children of my own at that time.  As an administrator, I welcomed 3-year-olds into our school from MD’s early intervention program, supporting parents as they trusted us with their little people, often out of their care for the first time!  At this point, it had become second nature to have “little bitties” in the school and they brought joy with them, regardless of their physical or developmental needs.  You just couldn’t help but believe everything was going to be ok for our littlest, often neediest, students.

While school was positive experience, at home, my husband and I began to worry about our youngest son at the time.  He was not talking with words, often relying on gestures or his older brother’s interpreting to get his needs met.  I spoke to our pediatrician, who we dearly loved, who tried to re-assure us that he would be fine, “just give him some more time.”  Still things did not improve, and his frustration grew leading to some difficult tantrums.  Ultimately, we were referred to our local EI office and speech services began.  We all learned to sign, and communication improved for a while.

When Payton was three, we moved to Harrisonburg.  We had become so used to signing with him and just so thankful that he could communicate, we lulled ourselves into believing, he would talk when he could.  Here, we met the SLP who I will forever be indebted to for giving our son spoken language, but also who uncovered our eyes in a very direct, but kind and gentle way, saying he was one of the “most apraxic children she had ever met and was not sure he would talk,” but we were going to keep working in that direction.  A total communication system was introduced with signs but also pictures. She explained that while Payton was fluent signing, others weren’t and so we needed to give him another tool to use as his world was expanding.  We enrolled him in a 3-year-old community preschool where the school SLP visited him 1x/week.  Additionally, I took him to meet with her at the public school after preschool the other 3x/week.  Yes, 4x/week for SLP services for a 3-year-old! Imagine!  Unfortunately, the community preschool was not a good experience for him as the teacher asked me one day to bring him after Show & Tell “since he really couldn’t share anything!”  My husband and I did not know this was happening as we worked with him the night before each Show & Tell, using his pictures at home to share about his chosen treasure.  Needless to say, I was outraged to realize he was never invited to share and truly could not understand excluding a child in a school routine!  Between the SLP and myself, we worked to build the teacher’s understanding and inclusion of Payton but to no avail as his behaviors worsened due to frustration and what I believe, was isolation when the SLP or I were not present, and we removed him from preschool.  The following year we enrolled him in the local VPI 4-year-old classroom with much more success.  Speech services continued for Payton into middle school. He ultimately learned to talk, speaking his first full sentence at age 6 without using any pictures or signs!  Today, Payton is finishing his last semester in college and while he talks well, “verbose” is not a word often used to describe him!

I never did return to school administration but instead interviewed for a LSM position in a new system in 2010 that would be serving the cities of Staunton and Waynesboro.  I had received children into my classrooms and buildings from EI, parented a child through EI, but never provided EI services.  I am happy to say 14 years later, I have found my niche!  I so enjoy meeting families in their homes and supporting them as they support their children, celebrating the accomplishments or holding their hands during the struggles.  I have had the pleasure of working with some of the most talented service coordinators and providers in the state!  Most recently, in 2023, I accepted a position at our CSB expanding my role serving individuals with disabilities as one of two Assistant Directors for Developmental Services.  I continue as the LSM for our EI program as well as support our DD waiver staff as they support individuals transitioning from EI services to DD waivers as young people through their adulthood.  As our director shared, it provides us the opportunity to ensure the best possible services, seamlessly, from birth to death.