

The Origin of MSLBD

An Accident of Time, People, and Location

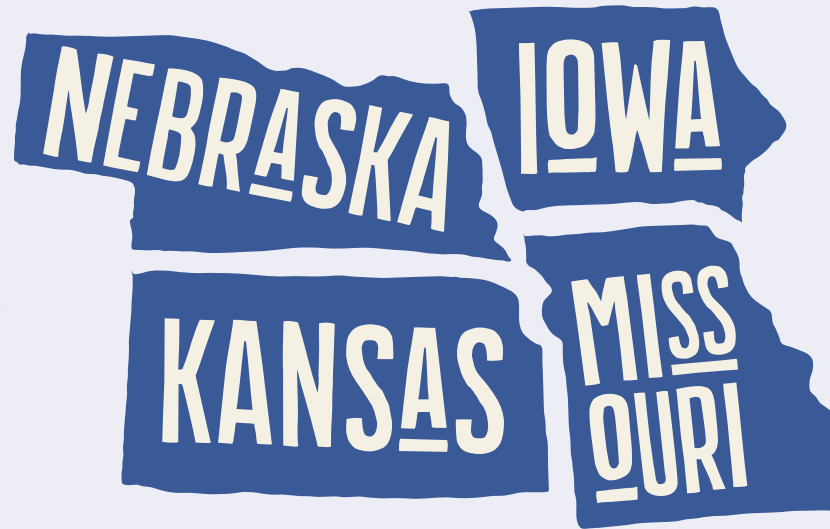
February 2022 will mark the 40th anniversary of the Midwest Symposium for Leadership in Behavior Disorders. How did this all begin? The story is in large part an accident of time, people, and location.

Time

The time happened to be just after the first federal special education legislation (The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, known then as P.L. 94-142) became federal law in 1975. The federal and state Departments of Education were anxious to train special education teachers, and states had grant monies to initiate local school programs and hire faculty to train teachers. The disability category of “serious emotional disturbance” was especially lacking in widespread programming or expertise regarding effective special education programming. As a result, and at about this time, several federal and state funded projects were underway. These included the Advanced Training Institutes in Serious Emotional Disturbance at the University of Minnesota (Frank Wood), the Conceptual Project in Child Variance at the University of Michigan (William Rhodes), and the National Needs Analysis Project at the University of Missouri (Judith Grosenick) and others. The newness of the field, along with new young faculty at several nearby locations in the Midwest, promoted an interest and desire to learn and share state of the art knowledge about special education interventions and programs.

People

In the fall of 1974, Robert and Mary Kay Zabel and Reece Peterson were in doctoral programs at the University of Minnesota, where they worked with and participated



in the Advanced Training Institutes led by Frank Wood. Beginning in the mid-1970s, the project brought virtually all the contemporary leaders, thinkers, and innovators in the new field of education of children with EBD to share their research, innovative programming, and ideas with teacher educators from across the country.

After finishing doctoral programs at Minnesota, the Zabels took positions on the special education faculty at Kansas State University. Richard Simpson, who had recently joined the special education faculty at the University of Kansas, invited them to join occasional meetings with other special education teacher educators to discuss their work and collaborate with one another to better meet the needs of Kansas children with EBD. Participants included Richard Whelan (Kansas University), Gene Plank (Emporia State University), Bill Boomer (Fort Hays State University, and later Wichita State University), and Diana Larson (Fort Hays State University). One outcome of their discussions was a commitment to plan and produce a state-wide conference for educators of students with EBD to be held in Wichita in 1981.

About the same time, Peterson took a position at Drake University in Des Moines, IA where he immediately met Carl Smith, who was then the consultant in behavior disorders for the Iowa Department of Public Instruction.

Smith and Peterson discovered common interests and pursued some Iowa-focused research projects. The following year, Peterson moved to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln where he connected with the Nebraska State Department of Education on a technical assistance project for teachers working with students with behavior problems. Simultaneously, Sharon Huntze was working with Judy Grosenick on the National Needs Analysis in Behavior Disorders Project at the University of Missouri. As part of that Project, Huntze had consulted in Iowa where she met and worked with Smith.

In 1981, several of these educators from Missouri, Nebraska, and Iowa attended the Kansas Conference on Emotional Disturbance in Wichita and saw the need and potential for a four-state consortium of educators of students with *emotional/behavioral disorders*. The Zabels, Huntze, Peterson, Simpson, Boomer, Larson, and Smith were part of that initial MSLBD planning committee. Over the following year they met at a second Kansas EBD conference held in Overland Park, KS and communicated via mail, telephone, and face-to-face (well before Internet, cell phone, or Zoom!).

They and a few others – administrators, teachers, university faculty, state department consultants, and advocates – met to discuss the need, purpose, and nature a “symposium” which would become the *Midwest Symposium for Leadership in Behavior Disorders* (MSLBD). They envisioned a Symposium that would focus on “Leadership” in the field. It would identify and invite top thinkers, researchers, and practitioners to use innovative formats to share their ideas, engage participants, and provide opportunities for participants to connect and interact with one another. The Symposium would be a place to take risks, challenge conventional “groupthink”, and have “fierce conversations” on controversial issues, avoiding complacency, inertia, and quick fixes.

Members of the initial group volunteered to help identify and invite presenters, arrange conference logistics, and work with state departments, universities, and school districts in the region to invite and encourage participation. The Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska State Departments of Education and the Mountain Plains Regional Resource Center office at Drake University in Iowa each contributed \$500 to support speaker expenses. Since that first conference, the organization has been self-sustaining without further external financial support.

Location

The initial focus was on the four states—Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska—represented by the early planners, although there was no intention of limiting participation to those states. Because Kansas City was at the geographic center of the region, readily accessible to planners, participants, and speakers, and an appealing destination with excellent conference accommodations, it was selected to host the first Symposium.

In February of 1983, more than 300 persons attended the first MSLBD at the Radisson Muehlebach Hotel in downtown Kansas City with a registration fee of \$30. In 1984, MSLBD moved to the Adams Mark Hotel and attendance increased to more than 400. In 1985 MSLBD moved to the Hyatt Regency Hotel at the Crown Center (now the Sheraton Crown Center) where it has been ever since. From the beginning, many participants have come from beyond the original four Midwest states, and today, MSLBD is a national organization.

In addition to the annual symposium, always held in late February, MSLBD has sponsored several additional activities. They have included a Conference for School Leaders on Behavior, the Simpson Autism Conference, the online magazine, *ReThinking Behavior*, the Janus Oral History Project, the Master Teacher Project, as well as awards for national leadership, exemplary programs, advocacy, and undergraduate and graduate education. Financial and registration arrangements for the first few MSLBD conferences were managed by Wichita State University and later, by the University of Missouri, Kansas City. In 1992, MSLBD was incorporated as a 501c3 non-profit organization in Kansas.

Over its 40-year history, the MSLBD Planning Committee has continued to evolve, adding membership from across the country. During that time, 200 individuals have been members of the planning committee including teachers, administrators, parents, advocates, and university faculty. Currently, about 40 members volunteer their time, expertise, and talents to plan and produce the Symposium and its other activities. Thus, an accident of the particular time, these people, and the Midwest location, contributed to the creation and evolution of this remarkable organization, The Midwest Symposium for Leadership in Behavior Disorders