

# Leadership Matters



January 2016

**2016 Superintendent of the Year  
Dr. Judy Hackett**





## Passion to help students with special needs drives Illinois Superintendent of the Year

**By Michael Chamness**  
**IASA Director of Communications**

Looking back, Judy Hackett remembers that she has always been drawn to children with special needs.

“I always loved working with people, children in particular, and in every camp, job or experience growing up, I gravitated towards children who were struggling,” said Hackett, who is in her ninth year as superintendent of the Northwest Suburban Special Education Organization (NSSEO). “I changed my major a few times in school. I was very interested in the business, systems aspect of work, but I was passionate about the needs of children.”

Working in the field of special education, it seems, was more a matter of fate than choice for Hackett – a destiny that included being named IASA’s 2016 Illinois Superintendent of the Year. She characteristically deflected the spotlight in accepting the award in November at the Joint Annual Conference in Chicago.

“This award has always recognized exceptional achievement. This year, it seems to me that it recognizes the achievement of the exceptional –

those exceptional students with disabilities across Illinois who embody courage in the face of unrelenting struggle and hope in the face of daunting odds,” she told the audience of several thousand. “They have always guided me to what is best in humanity and best in myself.”

Hackett’s destiny also was shaped by her parents and her colleagues.

“My parents taught me acceptance and tenacity, to follow my passion for learning and a tremendous work ethic that is genetic. My father was a letter carrier and my mother was a nurse. Their unwavering commitment to their work, family and community has been a constant source of inspiration for me and a model of valuing the reward of service over the pursuit of wealth,” she said. “In the field, I have had the incredible fortune to work with some of the most amazing leaders who continue to guide me, share wisdom and perspective and those include many of my colleagues in IASA and IAASE (Illinois Alliance of Administrators in Special Education) whose careers have been defined by their passionate work on behalf of students.

“My mom, Joan, demonstrates an amazing

positive attitude, youthful enthusiasm and care for others I try to emulate. My two sons, Matt and Zack, are following their passions in teaching philosophy and graphic design, but more importantly are the two great sources of pride and love in my life. Rich, my boyfriend, has continued to be a wonderful support and has shown me the incredible value of balancing the important work we do with life and finding time for what matters most.”



From left, sister Jan, mother Joan, Dr. Hackett, sons Matt and Zack.

In case anyone is counting, that is four times that some form of the word “passion” was mentioned by Hackett. No wonder that is the word mentioned most often used by those who nominated Hackett to be Superintendent of the Year.

NSSEO Board President Frank Fiarito praised Hackett’s focus on providing opportunities for the children in the special education district that serves eight member school districts and also provides services for deaf and hearing impaired students from 48 additional districts. NSSEO has the distinction of being one of the first special education district formed in Illinois some 44 years ago.

“Dr. Hackett is a strategic thinker who stays focused on helping children to become well-adjusted and independent individuals. She is *passionate* about education, truly loves our district’s children, wants what’s best for them, and continually advocates for their welfare on the federal, state and local levels,” Fiarito said. “Under her leadership, NSSEO has partnered with agencies and employers to continually expand opportunities for meaningful and satisfying job training for our students, and job placement for our

graduates.”

Said Dr. Dane Delli of River Trails District 26: “She has consistently and tirelessly advocated for

both special and general education students and her *passion* for serving all children is evident in all that she does...as the superintendent of NSSEO, she has successfully collaborated with all constituency groups in advancing the quality of education that the students in her district receive each day.”

Added retired Arlington Heights District 25 Superintendent Dr. Sarah Jerome: “She is a stellar example of thoughtful, assertive,

energetic leadership for all children – and particularly for those who may have the greatest needs...she is able to make public presentations to Congress, the state legislature, local school boards and small gatherings with equal parts poise, mastery of the facts and compelling *passion* always evident for students with disabilities.”

“This award has always recognized exceptional achievement. This year, it seems to me that it recognizes the achievement of the exceptional – those exceptional students with disabilities across Illinois who embody courage in the face of unrelenting struggle and hope in the face of daunting odds. They have always guided me to what is best in humanity and best in myself.”

--Dr. Judy Hackett ,  
2016 Illinois Superintendent of the Year



Hackett, a native of Skokie, began her career as a teacher working in small and large districts from Lake County to the south suburban districts of Chicago Heights. She taught blind and visually-impaired students, worked as a supervisor at AERO Cooperative and also served as an assistant superintendent at the Indian Prairie Community Unit School District in Aurora before being named superintendent of NSSEO in 2007.

Hackett received her Bachelor's Degree in Elementary and Special Education from Northern Illinois University, her Master's in Education Administration from the University of Illinois, a Certificate of Advanced Study in Educational Leadership from Lewis University, and her Doctorate in Educational Administration from NSU. She is thankful for the education opportunities afforded her.

"A dual degree in elementary and special education provided a broader picture of what it takes to educate the whole child, challenge learning and work collaboratively with peers," she said.

Dr. Brent Clark, Executive Director of IASA, noted Hackett's tenacity when it comes to students.

"Judy Hackett has dedicated her career to advocating for – and, when necessary, fighting for – students with disabilities," Clark said. "She is a respected national and state leader in the area of special education and personifies what it means to be the Illinois Superintendent of the Year."

Hackett closed her acceptance remarks at the Joint Annual Conference with this thought: "We must affect the future for education by collectively embracing the diversity of our students. There are limitless possibilities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century for us to change the landscape and open up even greater possibilities for the future success of our students."

Those who nominated Hackett noted several major accomplishments in her eight-year tenure as superintendent of NSSEO, including:

- ◆ Establishing and expanding partnerships with eight member districts so that their collective focus best aligns with students' and districts' needs across student services.
- ◆ Guiding reform through an ENGAGE.CONNECT.GROW theme that emphasizes the importance of engaging students, families, districts and community partners in the educational process, connecting and aligning practices that are uniquely designed to facilitate growth and success for diverse learners.
- ◆ Leading a progressive organization that includes comprehensive programs, services and supports that address a continuum of student needs through direct, integrated, consultative services, extensive professional development, coaching and diagnostic services for students ranging in age from 3-22.
- ◆ Advancing a comprehensive student-centered transition process that guides post-secondary goals through collaboration with families, community agencies and employers.