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## Susan Cole, Advocate for Traumatized Children, Dies at 72

Ms. Cole examined the link between abuse at home and problems in the classroom, and sought to help children who had been traumatized by violence.



By Neil Genzlinger

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At a time when many school officials thought the best way to deal with problematic students was to suspend or expel them, Susan F. Cole realized what may seem obvious now: Sometimes, trouble at school meant trauma at home.

Beginning in the 1990s, she became a leading voice in the movement to create “trauma-sensitive schools” in her own state, Massachusetts, and elsewhere, ones where the staff understands that abuse, neglect, hunger and other disruptions can affect a student’s in-school experience and behavior.

It was a new approach, said Michael Gregory, a clinical professor at Harvard Law School and the managing attorney of the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, which Ms. Cole founded in 2004.

“When I first started working with Susan in 2004, no one in schools was talking about trauma,” Professor Gregory said in an email. “We were always in rooms where we had to fight to get this conversation on the table. Now, the discussion about trauma’s impacts on learning is happening everywhere — not only in the United States, but increasingly around the globe. She helped fundamentally shift people’s understanding of who children are and what they need from their schools.”

Ms. Cole died of metastatic breast cancer on May 1 at her home in Cambridge, Mass., her son, Ben Eisen, said. She was 72.

Ms. Cole’s eureka moment came in the mid-1990s, when she was working as a lawyer for Massachusetts Advocates for Children, which seeks to ensure equal access to education for students who have special needs or face racial, economic or other barriers. She was representing a 15-year-old who had been expelled two years earlier after a fight, at a time when Massachusetts had an unforgiving expulsion policy for disciplinary issues.

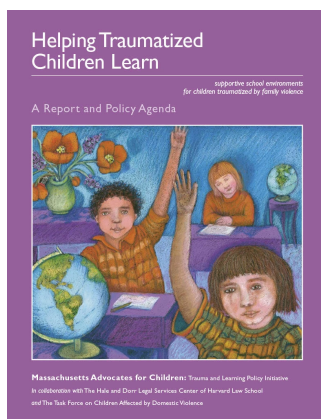
The boy had been removed from his mother’s care for neglect and from his father’s for abuse and was in foster care. Hoping to have him classified for special-education services to get him back in school, Ms. Cole took him to a psychologist.

“She said, ‘Drop all of those other diagnoses; this child has post-traumatic stress disorder,’” Ms. Cole recalled in a 2014 interview with the Harvard Law Bulletin.

She began a decades-long examination of the links between education and childhood trauma, using her accumulating experience to identify “broader systemic failures that could not be addressed on a case-by-case basis,” as her husband, David Eisen, put it.

Constant stress and fear were more than just a distraction for students; their effect, she learned, was neurological, activating the fight-or-flight survival instinct permanently.

“The brain,” she explained to The Durango Herald of Colorado in 2016, “cannot focus when it’s not calm. Children have to feel safe enough to learn.”



In 2005, the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, a collaborative effort between Massachusetts Law School, where Ms. Cole was a lecturer, published “Helping Traumatized Children Learn” Professor Gregory and four others.

A follow-up volume in 2013 focused more specifically on what schools could do about these volume was in the works. In 2014, Massachusetts approved a “safe and supportive schools” trauma-sensitivity measures in schools.

“She connected the dots,” Martha Minow, a professor at Harvard University and Harvard Law School, said of Ms. Cole by email. “She showed how teachers and staff equipped with the right information and training can foster vital learning and growth rather than blaming the individual child’s academic and behavior challenges on them.”

Susan Frances Cole was born on Aug. 4, 1948, in Chicago. Her father, Harvey, was a bacteriologist who later owned a toy store; her mother, Anne (Tucker) Cole, was a teacher. When Susan was 5 the family moved to Milledgeville, Ga., and later to Macon, Ga.

Growing up Jewish in the segregated South impressed upon Ms. Cole “life’s inequities and their consequences,” her son said. After two years at the University of Georgia, she transferred to Boston University, earning a degree in sociology in 1970.

Ms. Cole taught at the Fernald State School for people with developmental disabilities in Waltham, Mass., earned a degree in special education at the University of Oregon, and received a law degree from Northeastern University. She worked for the National Labor Relations Board before joining Massachusetts Advocates for Children.

Ms. Cole looked not only at the many things — abuse, hunger, neglect, disruption from natural disasters — that might unsettle a child’s life, but also at the cognitive results.

“When you come from a home that is very disorganized, sequence and cause and effect can be thrown off,” she told The New York Times in 2013. “This affects language development, memory and concentration. When teachers recognize this, it comes as a relief. Finally the scientists are explaining what they’ve seen firsthand!”

But educating teachers and administrators was only the first step.

“This is about changing the whole school environment,” she told The Times. “You can have a great trauma-sensitive classroom, but if the child goes into the hall or cafeteria and gets yelled at, he can get retriggered.”

Ms. Cole married Mr. Eisen, an architect, in 1986. In addition to him and their son, she is survived by a brother, Stuart.

In 2004 Ms. Cole founded the Education Law Clinic at Harvard, where law students learn to represent students who have experienced trauma and to promote relevant legislation.


“She empowered not only law students and lawyers but also children themselves as advocates for safe and supportive schools — bringing their voices directly to legislators and other policymakers,” Professor Minow said.


One life she changed was that of the 15-year-old she represented in that revelatory 1990s case. Some 20 years later he contacted her, and she sent an email to colleagues asking for suggestions on where she might take him and his new baby to lunch.


“He called with gratitude,” that email said in part. “I can’t believe it ... pinching myself. I am the one with gratitude. I guess these are the ‘bennies’ of our advocacy work.”

Neil Genzlinger is a writer for the Obituaries Desk. Previously he was a television, film and theater critic. @genznyt • Facebook

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