

Norman Ames Named IDRPP Division Director

JoLynne J. Lyon

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Technical Assistance Division Director Norm Ames

Norman Ames is the new director of a Utah State University division tasked with helping organizations improve services for people with disabilities and their families. The reach of the Technical Assistance Division of the Institute for Disability Research, Policy & Practice extends far beyond Utah.

The division includes the Center for Technical Assistance for Excellence in Special Education (TAESE) and WebAIM —two long-standing programs within the Institute. Both programs provide specialized training. TAESE has offered technical training to state offices of special education around the country, impacting educators and families in at least 35 states. WebAIM has provided specialized assistance to tens of thousands of professionals around the world.

Ames has been part of the Institute since 2012, after working as a school psychologist, school administrator and director for special education in Washington state. He is a USU alumnus, a veteran of the Gulf War, and the father of four boys. One of his sons is Autistic, and that has helped inform his work in special education.

"I am super excited about the Institute. At the leadership team level with [Executive Director] Matt Wappett and other division directors, we're finding ways to collaborate across research and services and technical assistance, because those three go hand in hand."

Within the Technical Assistance Division, WebAIM offers training on how to make content on the web and on digital documents accessible to people with disabilities. TAESE offers training on a variety of topics facing state offices of

special education: improving systems of dispute resolution, improving skills of K-12 interpreters for Deaf students, professional development for state and district staff.

"They're not really training them in new things," Ames said. "They're helping them do their job a little bit better by providing technical assistance and targeted skill building."

TAESE draws on experts from outside Utah. Some are part of the organization, working remotely; others are partners with whom TAESE has established a relationship. Both TAESE and WebAIM staff members were working remotely long before COVID-19 made it necessary.

WebAIM offered its first online training in 2003. In 2020 the WebAIM team moved its client trainings online.

For TAESE, having experts from outside Utah bolsters the work they do nationwide. "The IDEA, which is at the core of the services we provide, is federal. But it allows for enough flexibility at the state and local level that you find that systems regionally look different. They're implemented differently, based on the local and regional sort of culture and economics and mindset of people within regions. And so it does absolutely inform the work and forces us to learn more, and be better providers.

"The reason it works really well is because we've been through a lot of years of trial and error." TAESE hired its first remote workers back when video conferencing was rare. By the time 2020 rolled around, the organization was well prepared for the new work environment. "We didn't skip a beat," Ames said.