



Dr. C. Michael Nelson by Austin Wallace

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[University of Kentucky](#) Lexington, KY

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Education

BSE in Psychology and English, Kansas [State Teachers College](#), 1965

MS in School Psychology, Kansas State Teachers College, 1967

Ed.D. in Special Education with emphasis on Emotionally Disturbed, [University of Kansas](#), 1969

Dr. Charles Michael Nelson is an internationally recognized special educator. His contributions and dedication to serving children and youth with serious emotional disabilities in the special education and juvenile justice system have been recognized widely.

Background Information

Dr. Charles Michael Nelson was born on May 9, 1941 in Denver, Colorado. His family later moved to Kansas City, Kansas, where he grew up. At age 17, Dr. Nelson joined the Navy to expunge his then current, juvenile record. Overseas, he earned his

GED and completed training as a radar operator. He graduated with high honors. Upon his discharge, he returned home to Kansas and entered college at Kansas State Teachers College (now [Emporia State University](#)). He majored in Psychology and English. He credits his majoring in English to his high school English teacher, Rosalie Stein. Also because of her, he signed a contract to teach English at the middle school level in Kansas City, KS. As a psychology major, he took several courses in special education. He also served as the President of the [Psi Chi](#), which is the International Honor Society in Psychology.

Early Life

Following graduation, Dr. Nelson was hired by his mentor, Dr. Bill Tisdall, as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Special Education at the University of Kentucky. That first year was flawed by the unexpected death of Professor Tisdall. Dr. Nelson credits Dr. Tisdall with encouraging him to pursue a doctorate in special education.

At the University of Kentucky, Dr. Nelson proposed new approaches to teacher preparation called “competency-based teacher education,” and developed a competency-based leadership program in special education. In addition to competency-based teacher education, he was able to conduct research and training projects on

contingency management, applied behavior analysis, teacher consultation, positive behavior support, and systems of care for children and families affected by emotional and behavioral disorders. In addition to his role as coordinator of the graduate program for teachers of students with emotional and behavioral disorders, he also served as Director of Graduate Studies for the department from 1974-78, and as coordinator and principal investigator of the special education leadership preparation program from 1985-93.

Early in his career, Dr. Nelson noticed the lack of programs for children with emotional and behavioral problems in the state of Kentucky. He read about Project Re-ED (for re-education), an approach that was based on a European model for serving these children of this nature. This project was started at [Vanderbilt University](#) by Nicholas Hobbs. Dr. Nelson and a group of psychologists and educators visited Dr. Hobbs in Nashville, TN to learn more about the program. Upon their return they started their own Re-ED program in central Kentucky. Their proposal was granted, and funds were allocated to them along with a site for the residential school. The local public schools agreed to supply the teacher-counselors, and Dr. Nelson agreed to train them. Central Kentucky Re-Ed operated successfully for 25 years.

The outstanding work of Dr. Nelson kept him at UK for 35 years. During this time Dr. Nelson met Mary Margaret Kerr, who encouraged Dr. Nelson to co-author a

text for educators dealing with children exhibiting challenging behavior. The book, *Strategies for addressing behavior problems in the classroom*, is now in its 6th edition and third decade.

In the late 1970s Dr. Nelson became involved in the [Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders](#). He took an active role in the development and leadership of the organization. He served as vice-president, president-elect, president, and past president. Dr. Nelson also served as Chair of the Publications Committee for two terms (six years).

Later Work

Later in his career Dr. Nelson became involved with a project designed to create an integrated system of care for children and families with emotional and behavioral disorders. This project was called [Bluegrass IMPACT](#) (Interagency Mobilization for Progress in Adolescent and Children's Treatment). It served 23 central Kentucky counties and became a state-wide initiative. Later, it was changed to Kentucky IMPACT. Towards the end of his tenure at UK, he created partnerships in the National Technical Assistance Center for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), the National Center on Education, Disability, and Juvenile Justice (EDJJ), and the Kentucky Center for School Safety.

Involvement in the Juvenile Justice System

Some of Dr. Nelson's most important work outside of the special education system was working with adolescents in the juvenile justice system (JJ). His immense work in this area can stand alone and is equally praiseworthy to anything else he has done. Dr. Nelson's desire to work on the behalf of youth involved in the JJ system possibly stems from his early experiences as an at-risk youth. He realized that many youth with EBD were in the JJ system. He saw that the vast majority of youth with disabilities, including EBD, were not being appropriately served in juvenile correctional or detention facilities. Dr. Rob Rutherford at [Arizona State University](#) had the same passion, and together along with **Error! Reference source not found.**, an Assistant Professor in the [College of Justice and Safety at Eastern Kentucky University](#); the three began looking at the needs of, and services for incarcerated juveniles. Together they wrote a grant entitled The Correctional/Special Education Training Project, or C/SET. The goal was to establish communication and collaboration between correctional educators and special educators to develop and test curricula for preparing correctional special educators, and advocate for youth with disabilities in the JJ system. The proposal was funded, and the C/SET project was launched.

In 1999, Rutherford, Wolford and Nelson along with Dr. Peter Leone collaborated in writing another grant proposal. This one was called the [National Center on Education, Disability, and Juvenile Justice](#) (EDJJ). They proposed for preventing youth from entering the system through efforts in schools and communities; improving programming within JJ facilities for better outcomes; and establishing effective transition services to facilitate successful re-entry into the community. The proposal was approved and the project was jointly funded by the Department of Education and the Department of Justice. One of Dr. Nelson's main responsibilities in EDJJ was conduct prevention research. Throughout a series of studies examining differences between high-and low-performing schools in Kentucky, Dr. Nelson concluded that efforts needed to be placed on implementing positive behavior support. This would be beneficial both in preventing youth from entering the JJ system and improving the outcomes of those in it. Thus Dr. Nelson has dedicated the rest of his life helping improve the plight of disadvantaged youth

Influences on Dr. Nelson's Work

It would be difficult to pinpoint or list the people who influenced C. Michael Nelson. With great humility, he believes that all of his colleagues, mentors and students deserve equal if not more credit than himself for any accolades he has achieved.

According to him, the work has been shared and the benefits have been reciprocal. However, one of the books that inspired him as an early special educator was *A New Learning Environment* by Harold L. Cohen and James Filipczak. Cohen and Filipczak designed a contingency-managed environment that provided incentives for academic and behavioral improvement for youth in an incarcerated facility, with very positive results. Dr. Nelson believes this formed the basis of positive behavior support. After retiring from UK, Dr. Nelson has continued his involvement with the national PBIS center and facilitated the implementation of positive behavior support in programs involving at-risk and adjudicated youth, as well as those in alternative education and residential treatment settings. He is currently working with the Texas Youth Commission to implement positive behavior support in all of the state's secure juvenile justice facilities.

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