



Special Ed Needs Flexibility

By Krista S. Peyton, Esq., Guest Blogger

Families find it difficult to navigate the special ed system. In my experience, there's a tendency for school districts to push a one-size-fits-all model, with parents expected to accept what's on offer. My son, Maxwell, was diagnosed with autism at the age of three, and through grade nine, he was taught in inclusive settings. After years of increasing difficulty, we felt that he'd be better served in a more restrictive classroom. But we met with significant resistance.

The Inclusive Experience

At first, we wanted Maxwell to be served in as many inclusive settings as possible. Over time, though, the number of supports he needed in order to participate kept growing. We began to wonder whether or not that was the best model for him.

For example, sometimes as many as four support professionals got involved in his physical education classes to ensure that there were appropriate accommodations: his aide, the adaptive P.E. counselor, Maxwell's special ed teacher and a school administrator. He always had to arrive early and stay late. In a different setting, the class would have automatically been organized to handle language challenges, cognitive issues and other special needs. Maybe he'd benefit from an environment that came pre-equipped with all the supports he needed.

Maxwell also had behavioral issues that made it difficult for him to interact with others in his classes. Perhaps he'd flourish in a setting where he wouldn't be thought of as "different," and where a larger staff would be better able to manage his behavior.

At 14, when he was about to transition from middle school to high school—a time that's challenging for many students—we decided to request that he be placed in a restrictive school setting.

School Pushback

Our request to Maxwell's IEP (Individualized Education Plan) Committee was unusual, and we were met with shocked expressions. Most frequently, it's school staff suggesting restrictive classes for a child with disabilities. We explained that we believed Maxwell could more fully utilize the facilities and better engage in class activities in a specialized environment. But the burden of proof apparently fell to us.

We were asked to tour both the local high school and the specialized school we were considering, and we did so. The mainstream school was simply too stimulating for him to handle. He would never have been able to navigate the noisy cafeteria, and would have ended up eating in a classroom.

During our next IEP Committee meeting, we had an exhaustive discussion of Maxwell's needs and the various choices open to us. We were convinced that the restrictive setting was the right option, but the committee remained skeptical. So we asked that his middle school special ed teacher and a behavior specialist accompany us on yet another visit to the special school district. Their assessment agreed with ours, and when faced with "expert" opinions, the IEP Committee finally agreed to our request. It took several more meetings to rewrite Maxwell's IEP.

Maxwell did great adjusting to his new school. He was awarded a character award at the end of his first year. He is in a supportive environment, and we're optimistic about his future. The process of getting him there was stressful and we, as parents, felt that the burden was on us to prove that he needed something that didn't fit with the IEP Committee's preconceived notions.

IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) [permits restricted environments if they are the best fit for a child](#). Some kids with special needs benefit from classes that are more tailored to them, where they won't have trouble keeping up, feel over-stimulated or be bullied. Serving our children takes a nuanced understanding of the full spectrum of their needs. It shouldn't be such an uphill battle for parents to get the education that their children are legally entitled to.

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