

DEREK'S STORY: PART 2

The PPT Meeting: *Foiling an Ambush*

This is the second article in a series that chronicles one family's experiences throughout the school year as they deal with their 8-year-old son's learning differences in a suburban public elementary school. Though pseudonyms are used at the family's request, all other aspects of the story are true.

A few weeks ago while I was reading to my two younger children at bedtime, I heard a beautiful sound. It was laughter coming from Derek's room. He and his father were laughing together while reading a Jigsaw Jones book. My eyes filled with tears as I listened to his fluent reading. So this is what other parents experience with nightly reading enjoyment!

Derek has worked so long and hard for this success, and it is so sweet. He has changed so much in the past few months. He's more confident, mature and proud of his accomplishments. He still faces challenges and struggles every day, but he now knows he is capable of succeeding.

The Turning Point

Derek has been working with a private tutor for six months, and that has made all the difference. I had resisted hiring outside help last year, trusting the school to be responsible for his education. I know better now. In second grade, Derek's failure to progress led us to believe he needed more than the school was offering. This fall, we hired the teacher who spent the previous summer with him at a private special needs school. We value her expertise since she has been the only teacher who has taught Derek to read.

With the tutor secured and a new reading team and method implemented in school, we were seeing progress and

feeling successful in our advocacy efforts.

This week, however, all that changed unexpectedly. We were at a PPT meeting when we were thrown the curve. Derek's progress has been rapid, we were told. He is now reading only six months behind the average third grader. Usually, this would be good news, and you might expect that his teachers would have advocated for continuing what they were doing because it was obviously working so well. Instead, his teachers proposed decreasing his direct instruction from two hours a day to 40 minutes a day, suggesting he be mainstreamed into the regular classroom with a special education teacher for language arts support.

How could this happen? Derek was finally making progress in the public school system—apparently too much progress, according to their standards.

Forewarned and Forearmed

Their proposal would have been devastating had it been presented at the PPT without prior warning, as was our experience in the past. Luckily, we had been forewarned, by Derek's special reading teacher. She called the day prior to the meeting and proposed the changes to me as well as an increase in direct math instruction.

My reaction then was complete frustration, thinking all our efforts were futile. I thanked her for the warning and told her I'd discuss it with Derek and my husband. There was nothing to discuss. We could not let this happen and now would begin another fight to secure services for our son.

At the meeting the staff reported on Derek's progress, strengths, weaknesses and desire to be part of the class. They argued that although Derek had

difficulty with rote memorization and retention of facts, it was important for him to feel part of the class. It was their contention that since he spends two and a half hours daily out of the class for services, it is difficult for him to feel a part of the group.

Once they finished their proposal, it was my turn. I told them that I had discussed the proposal with Derek, who firmly expressed his desire to continue the direct instruction, saying "I want to see Mrs. Smith, because she helps me." The staff appeared surprised, but I was proud to report that my eight-year-old son is able to make such a mature decision about his education. He is beginning to advocate for himself, knowing what he needs to succeed despite how he feels. I concluded that we should discuss mainstreaming once he's reading on grade level. I was met with no resistance. We left the meeting with more instructional time, not less.

A Rollercoaster Ride

I believe in my heart that Derek's teachers agree with me but the administrative demands in public school are great. The teacher who forewarned me of the meeting agenda helped me secure services for Derek in her own way, and I think she may be an important ally.

So our school year continues, with its victories and defeats. This is the ride I was warned about. Every night at bedtime prayers I ask my children to mention something they are thankful for and the answers are usually amusing. One night, when I turned to my three year old and asked what he was thankful for that day, he looked at Derek and said, "I'm thankful for Derek reading to me." I looked at him and answered, "So am I."