

DEREK'S STORY: PART 4

Fighting For Our Son's Literacy

This is the fourth 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.

My earliest memories of learning to read are vague. I remember reading to my sister on Saturday mornings when I was in the third grade and she was in the first grade, but I don't remember actually learning to read; I seemed to have just acquired the skill. Since that time, I have taken my literacy for granted, assuming everyone reads with as little effort. Having a son with dyslexia is a humbling experience. I watch him fight for every word and realize literacy is a gift, and for some, it's a gift that requires a great deal of effort.

Enjoining the Battle

Since Derek began special education, I have learned to read again through his eyes, learning the rules of our language thanks to his tutor, who works tirelessly with him. Ironically, that knowledge, which is so valuable to him, has contributed to my decreased popularity with the school's teaching staff.

As the school year enters its final marking period, we are at a crossroad. While the school reports Derek's continued progress, we see a standstill, even a regression in his spelling, writing and math memorization skills. This is confirmed by his tutor.

We decided to meet with a private advocate to discuss our disagreements with the school. Upon review of Derek's IEP and test scores, she reported a discrepancy between the school's test results, the results of an educational

study, and our parent observations submitted in writing at each IEP meeting.

The advocate recommended a private evaluation at the school's expense to detail the disabilities and document his progress. The school has subjective evaluations showing progress, but standardized evidence is necessary to determine if the progress really exists. While this recommendation filled me with dread and anticipation, I knew it was our only choice. She informed us of our legal rights, and we proceeded to schedule the next IEP meeting.

Another Stressful IEP Meeting

As Derek floats from grade to grade, these meetings become more stressful. We scheduled this one to review the IEP and discuss goal revisions. Derek hasn't met 95% of the goals written two years ago. We expressed our concerns, asking how his teachers planned to meet them and received no response. In the past we sat in the meetings, listening to them report on his progress, but this meeting was different. The teachers tried to convince us of his progress by presenting writing samples demonstrating proficient skills in spelling. Derek's spelling is well below grade level; the samples looked as if they belonged to another student, not the child I observe struggling to write a simple sentence. I asked how the product was achieved and the teacher stated she sat with my son, correcting each word, asking if "it made sense." How humiliating for Derek! Of course it made sense to him. The meeting continued with the same excuses for low math and state standardized test scores.

With my face displaying the com-

plete frustration I felt, I read our parental observations, which had been written prior to the meeting. Our account of Derek's lack of progress contradicted the school's report; in conclusion I requested the independent evaluation. I was told my request was heard, and the meeting continued for another 90 minutes while the staff tried to convince us of his progress. We left the meeting with no revised goals, no methods offered to achieve the goals, but an agreement by the school for an independent evaluation.

Since the school didn't offer us names of evaluators, we found a reading specialist, set the date, and informed the school in writing. Luckily, they granted our request, and our son underwent psychoeducational testing for the third time.

Awaiting the Outcome

We currently await the evaluator's report. He will compare scores to show progress, if any, and present at the next IEP meeting. The school also awaits the test results, since they will determine our next step. Can the school provide an appropriate program for him? Or is outplacement by the school in order?

No matter what the result, as parents we feel the school is not putting the child first; instead it seems that district budgets often guide our children's education, not a child's need.

Succeeding in this process is not for the faint-hearted. My husband and I have needed to call on every ounce of energy and determination we possess. The advocate has helped us put our game plan into play, and with her assistance, as well as the evaluator's, we hope we're one step closer to helping Derek receive his gift of literacy.

