

February 2, 2015

Dear Representative:

My oldest child has mixed expressive-receptive language disorder. He did not meet any of his early language milestones and barely communicated at all throughout preschool. At age 5 specialists tested his language level, finding him in the first percentile in receptive language and the fifth in expressive language for his age. That meant that 95% of his peers could say more words than he could and 99% could understand more. Despite being in speech therapy from 18 months on, his language skills were virtually nonexistent. Intervention would be necessary for him to have any hope of overcoming these deficits.

As you can imagine, my husband and I wanted him in the “right” educational setting. Even though the coastal area of the state is densely populated, we did not find many private schools, limiting our options. We visited the local Catholic elementary only to be told—not unkindly—by the principal that my son would not be welcome there. She said her staff was not trained to teach students with special needs. While a speech therapist did work with a few kids, she actually came over one morning a week from the public elementary school to do so. The other parochial schools in the diocese, she told us, all would give us the same answer. That cut out the only other schools within reasonable driving distance.

So we enrolled him in Jackson County Schools, where he was deemed right for an inclusion classroom. This meant that he would be in a class with regularly-performing students, but would still get special education services. The school assigned him a case worker/aide who would monitor him in class every day, giving him extra help where needed. A behavioral therapist met with him and designed a program to keep him motivated, sometimes stopping in with specially-designed therapeutic toys to use as a reward for hard work. On weekdays when the regular kids went to special area (art, music, library, etc.), he either went to work with a speech therapist or to the computer lab to work on an interactive listening program designed for kids with language deficits. Any questions or concerns I had about his education were dealt with immediately and professionally in every instance.

His first semester was pretty hairy—straight Cs, Ds, and even a few Fs. But with the diligence of his special ed team and regular classroom teachers, he brought his understanding (and grades) up slowly and steadily. He is now an honor roll student in middle school. Although academics can still be a struggle and his language skills continue to lag behind his peers, he largely completes his work without much intervention. At least in his case, the system worked.

To my knowledge only one private school in the state—the DuBard School for Language Disorders in Hattiesburg—would have been able to help my child. More than an hour’s drive away, it had a waiting list for entry when I looked into it. But any public school would have at least had the personnel, and depending on the system, the additional resources in the way of computers and other therapeutic instruments. Public schools have to provide these services by law. Private schools do not. Ironically, interventions private schools do choose to offer are frequently administered by public school personnel. Parents must bring their children to the public school for services if no agreement is in place at the private school.

Private school vouchers to help special needs students is nothing more than a political shell game. First of all, there just aren't that many private schools out there. And, as I personally experienced, they do not have to admit any student they don't want to teach. Private schools on the whole are not set up to help kids like my son. They usually get what services they offer from public schools. So the state legislature would actually be pulling funding from public schools, funneling it to private schools, and expecting public school therapists to continue to service the same number of students. This is outrageous. Why not put those resources towards public schools already set up to handle them?

My only issue with the system as I've encountered it is that the sheer volume of students that public school therapists are expected to serve means that special ed staff often complain of exhaustion and burnout. If the school systems were fully funded as promised by law, every system could have enough teachers, therapists, and aides to handle the children in their district. Money could also go towards computer programs, therapeutic toys, and other resources to help kids like my child learn to be successful.

In a shell game, the money always winds up where you least expect it. Why don't we put the money where it's needed instead? I implore our legislators to pass HB 814, the Special Education Improvement Act of 2015. It would put resources where they would be most effective, by requiring special education funding be a line item in the budget that can be easily monitored. It would also set up a state coordinator for autism services at MDE to help develop programs and services for kids on the spectrum around the state. Finally, it would establish the Children with Special Needs Fund that parents could tap into to help pay for treatments or equipment not provided by the schools that a physician or licensed professional thinks could help their child. These common sense solutions will reach a much larger number of kids who need help.

Sincerely,

Tara Moore Skelton
Jackson County Parent