

Maggie [REDACTED]
Senate Testimony on Special Education
Austin, Texas
June 16, 2010

I have two fabulous boys, Tyler and [REDACTED]. Tyler is an 11 year old boy with autism. He was born in NJ and we noticed he wasn't putting words together like his peers when he was 2. He was diagnosed with PDD at the time and he entered a special ed Pre K program in the Middletown School District. They had two programs, one for children with various disabilities and one for children with autism. The child study team recommended the class for children with autism for Tyler. He didn't have an autism diagnosis yet, but the child study team recommended the more intensive program which was 5 hours a day 5 days a week. We didn't know if it was just a speech delay at the time, but they said something profound to me that has resonated with me all these years. They said he needs to learn to function in society.

Tyler benefitted from the intensive highly structured language-rich program where he received ABA therapy in the classroom along with speech therapy, occupational therapy and adaptive PE. However, life was stressful. I was working full time in NY in an exciting career yet my husband talked me into a life change to slow it down for the kids.

When [REDACTED] Tyler was 4 we moved to Arizona. The educational program in the Deer Valley Independent School District was far inferior to the program we were used to in NJ, however, the state funds support services through the Department of Developmental Disabilities. They pay for whatever your child needs that your insurance company doesn't cover.

Tyler benefitted from an intensive home ABA program, speech and occupational therapy twice a week as well as music therapy. However the school had him in a special ed classroom in Kindergarten and 1st grade. I had to hire an advocate and fight for inclusion in a general classroom for a small portion of the day.

After 3 years in Arizona, my husband had an opportunity in Austin and we decided to go for it. We researched various school districts in Austin to decide who offered the most appropriate program for Tyler in a reasonable commuting distance for my husband. I met with two different principals along with Pam Martin, who was an autism specialist. We decided to purchase a home in Circle C West. Pam had recently accepted a position as counselor at Clayton Elementary School and although it wasn't public knowledge she assured me that Clayton would be a good fit for Tyler.

Tyler was a runner when he was young and has qualified for a one-on-one teacher's aide since Kindergarten. He needs help focusing many times each day to be successful in the least restrictive environment. When Tyler started 2nd grade at Clayton, the first thing he asked a classmate was "Are you a bully?" He had been exposed to so many negative behaviors of classmates in a special ed classroom – this was a natural anxiety for him. The young boy was astounded to be asked this question, but assured Tyler he wasn't. I have been very open about educating Tyler's classmates and their parents about Tyler's autism. I believe it has helped to increase awareness and compassion for Tyler each year. The classmate I mentioned has been a

compassionate special friend and advocate for Tyler over the years. Tyler considers [REDACTED] to be his best friend today.

Tyler has had a tremendous support system at Clayton Elementary School. Dr. Dru Robinnett fosters an inclusive environment for all our special kids. Dru and Pam Martin, along with Vice Principal Amy Lloyd worked closely with his teachers to design an individualized education program to help Tyler succeed each year. I received daily communications (a behavior intervention program or BIP) so I could reward him for appropriate school behavior and withhold privileges if he didn't do his best. We created an effective partnership between school and home to support Tyler in every way we could.

I work on the yearbook each year as my way of giving back – and met the growing support staff that Clayton put in place to support the growing population of kids with special needs. I see them walking the special kids around campus each day – supporting them as needed so they can participate in the general ed classroom for as much of the school day as they are able.

Tyler has had three different support staff work with him over the last 4 years at Clayton to help him succeed in a general ed classroom and so that he wouldn't rely too much on one person. They've changed his BIP many times to increase expectations or adjust the reward system because Tyler regressed or had difficulty following school rules and expectations after a holiday break. This past year the team made it more complicated because he could grasp a more complex reward system.

Tyler passed all his TAKS tests and graduated from Clayton Elementary School this month. He is excited about middle school, yet we are still waiting for approval of the support staff that he needs to succeed alongside his peers. I am optimistic that his years at Gorzycki Middle School will be just as rewarding for Tyler.

I highly recommend that the special ed director work with Dr. Dru Robinnett and Pam Martin to educate other schools on the strategies they have implemented to help our special kids succeed. It takes a belief that our special kids have the cognitive ability to learn and a school culture that supports their communication and learning needs.

It is a crime that there is a 7 year wait list for support services through the state of Texas. Families can go bankrupt paying for therapies. We continuously fight with insurance companies to cover therapies and RELY on the school system for educational support. The cost to society and SSI in the future will be far more than the cost of special education support if these children do not receive the services they need now.

Thank you for listening to my story and supporting our special kids. Tyler aspires to be a Kindergarten teacher or would make an exceptional librarian. However, he will continue to need support in the general ed classroom to graduate from middle school, high school, college, and achieve his goals.