

This article from The Patriot News, Harrisburg, highlights the work of Jennifer King, Parent Leadership Institute Graduate

Parents of special-needs students push for mainstreaming in West Shore School District

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Jennifer King envisions her son going off to college, having a career and maybe even getting married.

Those might sound like the average mother's dreams for her son, but for the parent of a special-needs child, they can sound downright extraordinary.

"Everything will be his decision," King said of her son's future. "But I work very hard to not limit his own thoughts of his own potential."

King is fighting the West Shore School District to keep her third-grade son, who has Down syndrome, in mainstream classrooms as much as possible.

When the district proposed transferring her son to a special-education classroom for two core academic subjects, King said she requested a meeting with school and district officials.

In the past, when she requested a meeting, no changes were implemented during the process of working out their differences, she said.

But this time, King found out her son's classroom placement was changed before the meeting took place because she did not initiate mediation or file a due-process complaint to halt the changes.

So King helped organize a group of parents and supporters who co-signed a letter to the school board and attended the Oct. 15 board meeting.

In the letter, parents cited concerns over the process the district uses to change students' Individualized Education Programs, the tailored blueprint for each student's special needs and educational goals.

They contend that the district has become less willing to work with the parents of special-needs children when it proposes a change to the child's program. They say parents' steps if they disagree with the proposed changes — entering mediation or filing a due-process complaint — are burdensome for families.

But to King, it's worth fighting to keep her son in the mainstream classroom so he has a better chance of being independent and successful later in life.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, students with disabilities who spend 75 percent or more of their high school education in regular classrooms are five times more likely to be employed — and make more money — after leaving school than students who spend 25 percent or less of their high school time in those same classrooms.

District spokeswoman Crista DeGregorio would not comment on the letter to the school board.

Rosemary Holecki, special-education coordinator for the district, did not return a call seeking an explanation of the district's Individualized Education Program procedures.

This is not the first time the district has run into problems with parents over students' educational plans.

In December, the district agreed to pay up to \$16,000 to two families — \$3,500 to one and \$12,500 to the other — to compensate them for "education-related expenses" related to disagreements about the course of the students' education plans.

The families were unhappy with what the district was proposing for the students.

Kathy Brill, president of the Pennsylvania chapter of TASH, a nonprofit disability rights advocacy group, said it's up to each school district to establish smooth working relationships in these cases.

"It depends upon the administration of the school district," Brill said. "They have a huge role in the environment and attitude that runs throughout the school. When they don't show that type of leadership, all sorts of things can break down."

Parents express a variety of frustrations with special-education issues in the district beyond just classroom placement, but many are united in feeling that the working relationship between parents and school officials has deteriorated.

Some want their child placed in mainstream classrooms, while others want their child in classes taught only for children with special needs.

But the parents are united by feelings that concerns are brushed aside or that the district stalls in remedying their complaints.

Michele Gibb said parts of her son's educational plan were not followed last year and that the district's unresponsiveness to her concerns ultimately contributed to her son's failing ninth grade.

Gibb said Eli, who has attention-deficit disorder, was supposed to receive study guides from teachers to help narrow the material he should focus on learning, but that he never received one until about a month before the school year ended.

She said weekly conferences between Eli's learning-support teacher and his regular classroom teachers to determine whether he needed help or was falling behind also did not happen.

"I was at point where I felt maybe we needed to hire an advocate or a lawyer, because every time I tried to climb a rung on the ladder ... it was almost like they'd brush things over, not give me the help I needed," Gibb said. "It seemed they felt maybe I'd give up and go away."

She said that in Individualized Education Program meetings she and her husband requested, they told school officials what Eli needed and what parts of the program weren't being followed, but officials just said Eli needed to try harder.

"That's not what IEP meetings are supposed to be," Gibb said. "It's for us all to work together as a team to make our kids more successful in school."

Judy Chabanik, who said she has a great working relationship with her son's classroom teachers, echoed Gibb's concerns at the district level.

"I simply found that there has been a slow and steady decline ... in the amount of cooperation that we feel during IEPs and during reviews," said Chabanik, whose son is autistic and legally blind.

"It feels they are not as responsive and open to parent input as they have been in the past," Chabanik said. "None of us wants to go to litigation ... we would rather just sit down and talk this out and as a team come up with what would work."