



April 25, 2017

## A Parent's Perspective: For My Son Kevin, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Wasn't Enough

By Ana Garcia,

In recent weeks, there's been a wave of scrutiny over school choice vouchers for students with special needs. An Education Week headline proclaimed they are "no silver bullet," while a New York Times story warned they "may come with hidden costs." I think most parents of students with disabilities know vouchers aren't a panacea. But to be fair, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) isn't one either.

IDEA requires public schools to customize the educational needs of special needs students through Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). But sometimes, even with the best intentions, IDEA and IEPs still fall short. In those situations, vouchers and education savings accounts give parents other paths to customization and success for their children.

As a 15-year veteran of public schools, I saw students with special needs in my classrooms every year. IEPs often dictated that a resource aide attend class with the child. Yet in 15 years, I never saw a single aide in my class. I'm certain the school district received the additional federal funds for the child, but for some reason, the money never trickled down to my classroom.

When IEPs aren't followed, parents are forced to fight. This can result in constant arbitration meetings with school and district officials. Many times, school leaders figure out ways to make accommodations and rectify problems, but sometimes parents discover that nothing will be resolved. In these instances, no one leaves happy.

For decades, parents facing that outcome could either accept defeat or find a lawyer. But now, in states like Florida, they increasingly have options available through educational choice.

I've seen more and more once-frustrated parents switch to other district schools using open enrollment, or move to charter schools, or use vouchers to attend private schools. These options aren't a cure-all, but in Florida they have been part of the solution.

Although I taught for many years, I didn't realize the full extent of educational struggles for children with special needs until I had my own.

My son Kevin, now in second grade, was diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) early in his life. He remained nonverbal for his first five years. Even pointing to indicate his needs was difficult, while tantrums and self-harm were frequent.

My husband and I immediately began intervention

therapies for him. However, academic and behavioral problems meant Kevin bounced from one school to another in our hopes of finding a program that would tailor to his unique needs.

Our son has great intellectual aptitude, but he suffers from behavioral problems, including irritability and outbursts. In general education courses, where he could learn the most, there were too many distractions and not enough attention from his teachers.

We tried the inverse: self-contained classes. But that meant sacrificing access to grade-level education, since the students in these settings had varying exceptionalities where exposure to grade-level material was not yet possible.

The schools we tried couldn't find the right balance, so we decided to try something new. I dropped everything and became a home education mom.

My goal was to find a way to make academics and behavioral therapy work in tandem, without sacrificing either. My tool was the Gardiner Scholarship, a new voucher in Florida that gives parents control over educational resources.

It provides parents of children with special needs access to accounts, worth \$10,000 on average, that they can spend on tuition, fees, textbooks, curricula, therapies, tutors, digital devices, and more.

Armed with these new resources, my husband and I were able to create a customized regimen where our son would have full access to services, therapies, learning materials, and one-on-one instructional time using a personalized curriculum. We no longer had to reduce therapies to get academics. Instead, we increased their frequency, duration, and intensity, which positively impacted Kevin's ability to learn.

Instead of a traditional classroom, Kevin attends Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy daily. While at the ABA facility, he sees speech therapists, occupational therapists, and a tutor. All of them coordinate with each other on Kevin's daily tasks — and all are paid with Gardiner funds.

Activities and lessons are drawn up through a scheduling board to keep Kevin on task, and to ensure he knows the routine and how long each lesson or activity will last. When behavioral issues threaten to derail him, the registered behavioral therapist steps in with corrective action.

I'm also able to synchronize Kevin's lessons with each specialist. For example, after Kevin expressed a fear of thunder, I worked with the therapists and a tutor to develop a storyboard of lessons and activities around thunder. Exposure and response prevention allowed Kevin to be incrementally exposed to things that triggered his anxiety, but in a safe setting.

The behavior and occupational therapists worked with Kevin to develop coping strategies. The therapists showed him pictures, and later videos, of lightning. To help him cope with these frightening sights and sounds, the therapist taught Kevin calming techniques such as counting down, walking, and deep breathing. The speech therapist also worked with Kevin on ways to articulate his fears and thoughts, instead of screaming and crying. For example, Kevin could ask to wear earmuffs or ask for hugs if he became scared. Meanwhile, the tutor gave a science lesson on cloud formation and lightning, so Kevin could understand why thunder occurs.

Now that he's able to understand what thunder is and verbalize his concerns, thunder is less frightening to him.

Kevin is progressing in so many ways. The scholarship has allowed us to create an environment where he can improve his social interactions, build relationships, sustain and improve age-appropriate conversations, and control inappropriate behaviors. He's also working on his organizational skills, including self-management skills such as memory, attention, planning, and self-awareness. All these skills are required for educational success. All are needed for Kevin to become fully independent.

The scholarship, in short, has been a lifesaver. It has given me the power and flexibility to oversee my child's education, and for us, it's working.

I appreciate that many parents will get the services they need for their special needs children in public schools, thanks to IDEA. But for those who don't, it's vital to have options.

*Ana Garcia of Homestead is a 15-year veteran of Florida public schools. She has served as a classroom teacher, language arts instructor, and school-level director for accountability and instruction.*