

My name is Diane Perry and I am the proud parent of David Perry who is 20 years old. David lives at home with his parents and older brother. David is a very busy young man attending his last year in the district at a vo-tech program studying Culinary Arts and Hospitality. He also has 3 part time jobs, has a personal trainer at the YMCA, and hangs out with his friends riding his bike, listening to music or sometimes jamming on his drums. David has many hopes and dreams for his future like most young adults his age such as going to college, driving a car, being in a band, moving out into his own apartment and possibly getting married one day. David shares these hopes and dreams with those who support him. I tell you this because our school experiences shape our future.

David has been receiving special education services since he entered into our school district. David's journey through special education has had many highs and many lows. With David now in the last stretch of his time in the district, it is good to reflect on what worked, what didn't and why. I attribute most of his success from his own ambition and wanting to learn every day. David has always loved to go to school, loves to read and write and was most successful in navigating all the relationships in school with friends, teachers and administrators. I, also advocated tirelessly to ensure David was receiving the necessary supports and services that were written in his IEP. This was a most difficult task throughout David's education that I encountered. David was educated with his typical peers in his neighborhood school following in his brother's footsteps. While I knew this was the law to educate David in this setting, it was not always easy. It was also disheartening to listen to many other parents along the way make the most difficult choice to educate their child in a segregated setting because their child was regressing or having major difficulties because the district was not appropriately teaching their child. I also knew how much more expensive it was to bus their child out of district and pay for that approved private school. I watched over and over again and was saddened that the funding was not appropriately being used to bring the supports and services to the students within the district. I was vigilant in making sure that David's' teachers and support team, had the resources and training to best educate him, but I did not understand why this was not happening to his other peers who could have also benefited from these same supports. I would also attend many statewide trainings and workshops to find out how the district can best educate David. One example is co-teaching which is where you have a regular education teacher and a special education teacher together teaching ALL students. This was a very successful model and was very cost efficient but the district struggled with having to change to that model and still be able to offer other supports and services. I believe the way the funding was set up, they could not provide the more cost efficient ways of teaching and still provide the supports and services other students needed within the district. There are so many different models across the state that each district needs to figure out what works best for their culture of students, but what research shows and proves day in and day out to

me is that keeping the students in their home schools with their peers, is the most cost efficient mechanism. While my son David is very successful there are also many gaps in his education. For example, Reading. David always had a love to read but the personnel struggled with so many different programs and unfortunately, in my opinion, wasted many funds because they were never consistent with specific teaching models. David is 20 years old and reads on a third grade reading level if you were to test him but in reality of day to day material, he shows much success in reading at higher levels and understanding. I believe this is due to his being included in general education classes where he was being exposed to all levels of reading.

As David approached transition age, which is 14 in the state of Pennsylvania, we really started focusing on what life would be like for David after graduation. This was another huge struggle in advocating for David because the district would try to cookie cutter students who needed lifeskills into Intermediate Unit programs that cost way too much money, instead of continuing the teaching within the district along with their peers. A perfect example of this was when David entered high school and they had a program for students with lifeskills and they were very insistent that David be in this program. David had aspirations to go to college and be a tax paying citizen in competitive employment. This lifeskills program was only focused on his daily needs which I, as his parent could teach him and we did. One of their activities was to go to a mattress store and learn how to make a bed. I was appalled that ALL his peers were not allowed the same opportunity of this activity which means if his peers are not being taught this in school, then why he should be exposed to such demeaning activities of his skills. The success rate of this lifeskills program of students who were getting competitive employment or even attending college was little to no success. So, why would I even consider David to be in that program when I knew he could continue his successful academic achievements in general education and elective classes at the high school. This was the path David took which led him to audit college classes, navigate his community where business owners were getting to know him, and all of his peers knowing and seeing his successful abilities. I expect this coming year for David to be successful and hope that it leads him to continue his education or find a full time position in competitive employment.

I am very happy that this commission will be making some great positive changes for districts across Pennsylvania. With a more guided way of success for students in how to fund the most needed supports and services, I can only hope that students who receive special education can benefit greatly not only in academics but in all aspects of their life.