

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to participate in this process. I am a parent of a child with autism and ADHD who is in 4th grade. He entered special education when he was in danger of being thrown out of his community preschool because it was not a "good fit." A few months later we received a medical diagnosis of "autism." Needless to say my husband and I were numb and blown away by the process and the impact it has had on our lives.

After our first meeting at the "PPT" meeting learning about "spec" and "IDEA" and talking with the OT, PT and about goals on our "IEP," I realized my best bet to learn the new language was to take a class. Once I realized how much I liked the new language, I went full bore. I spent the first part of my adult life practicing law and now the second part is how to apply a special part of that law. After obtaining a masters in special education, I'm now a 4th year student in a special education PhD program at UConn. I adore law and policy, kids with ASD (autism), ADHD, and EBD (emotional behavior disturbance), and I even know what those terms mean in the alphabet soup of special ed.

What I have been asked to do here is to talk about challenges and solutions for special education. First I want to be adamantly clear, special education has given my son his best chance at living the kind of life I had envisioned. He was not able to talk, play with others, or sit still long enough for any academic task. After a few years of preschool, he was able to play around others, speak multiple phrases, and sit still for a few minutes. In that first year we went for a Yale study and they had hopes that he had the beginning signs of cognitive development. Flash forward to 4th grade, and I have a child who is reading, doing multiplication, is in his regular classroom, regular boy scouts, regular religion etc. That's not to say we don't struggle with social issues, and we have academic challenges aplenty, but when I tell him that I love him, he answers back that he loves me to. He tells jokes (with "appropriate" potty humor), and he is as concerned as his typically developing cousins that his elf in the shelf will report back only the good things to Santa. Without special education, I firmly believe that none of this would be possible. Starting when he was three, he received specialized instruction based on his individual abilities that has allowed him to fully participate in his classroom and in society at large.

Another thing that I like to share is that there is a stated purpose under the IDEA.

(d)(1)(A) to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment and independent living

I try to remind my son's team of this purpose every year and that this is what we are working toward. We need to keep this goal in mind. How (and what) do we measure effectiveness in special ed.? What are the challenges and possible solutions? To that end, I see three main challenges and possible solutions:

1. Addressing the Unique Needs: Special education is meant to look at the individual needs of the students. How do we determine these needs? To me this is intrinsically linked with the collection of data. We need teachers to assess and collect data up front, to select an intervention based on this data, and to take data after the intervention. If you want to know that special education is effective, you look at what the data tells you. You start with evidence-based interventions that research has shown to be basically effective for your population or concern but to match the unique need, you look at the data to see if special education is effective for each student.
2. Preparing for the future: Special education is meant to address education, employment, and independent living. To that end, we need to measure effectiveness the same way that we look at our NT's (neurotypicals). How many are employed or in college? Will they be living at their parents forever or living in the community? In order to do this, we need to consider all the way through that end goal (and I remind my PPT team that this is what drives me at every meeting for my son). We also need to make sure we include transition as a priority starting in junior high and to make sure that we use evidence-based practices to build self-determination and the requisite skills to be able to achieve this purpose.
3. Providing FAPE (Free Appropriate Public Education) and here I would add in the least restrictive environment. When my son leaves public education based on his unique needs, strengths, and weaknesses, I won't be overly impressed if he is working in small room with a one-on-one helper. This is not to say that based on the individual needs of a person that this is not the most appropriate setting and level of assistance, but that it depends on the unique needs of the student. I don't think that all students require full inclusion in classes (although preferable), but on the same token not all students require full pull-out or a one-on-one paraprofessional. It gets back to my emphasis on the importance of data and those unique needs. But it also gets to a mindset of how we view special education. I'm a firm supporter in using a multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) framework, which is a new alphabet code for SW-PBS (school-wide positive behavior support) or SRBI (scientifically research based intervention in Connecticut). That model works under the assumption that we use data and team-based decision making. Based on years of research, about 80% of students benefit from universally based instruction (aka Tier 1), about 15% require a bit more, such as small group in targeted areas (aka Tier 2), and about 5% might need more individualized instruction. Special education is often seen as outside this tiered pyramid, and based on the needs of the student it might be that the unique needs cannot be addressed without specialized instruction beyond the upper tip. However, it has been my experience that we have looked at special ed and general ed as separate entities and forget that we can include all children in the least restrictive setting by focusing on their unique needs and how those needs can be met. We should not assume that a

student always needs specialized instruction in every area. We need to rely on data and attempt to see if the child will respond to tiered instruction. I am not saying that we wait too long to see if the intervention is effective, but if we assume that a student will not get it because they are “special ed.,” we are making our decisions based on a bias and not on the data. For my son at his recent conference, I saw that he was struggling with reading comprehension. I immediately asked for special ed. instruction and goals on the IEP to address this area. His team thought that the delays were not enough to require special education. When I looked at the assessment results, it indicated he would benefit from tier 2 instruction (small group). He was not getting the universal but a small group might bridge the gap. Why did I focus on it as being a special ed issue? What would be more effective in this situation? Assuming that the school has adequate tier 2 reading interventions, why can't we try that first—look at the data and see how he is responding to a regular tier 2 intervention? Why didn't the team suggest this option? So when I think overall about challenges in special education, and I consider the mandates of IDEA with FAPE in the LRE, I see the benefits of using a MTSS framework for *all* children, including those with special needs.

In essence, I see three main challenges: meeting the unique needs, preparing for the future, and meaningful inclusion with typical peers and my potential solutions are data-based decision making, transition planning, and utilizing a MTSS framework.

To conclude, it's been an interesting journey—one that I would not have enjoyed without the support of special education. If you ask me if I think special education is effective, it would be a loud shout that would break any meter of sound volume. If you ask me if it's effective for my son, I would say it has been. However, I have to reserve full judgment of effectiveness. For that ultimate longitudinal question, you will have to invite me back in 20 years, and we can discuss the data.