

There are nearly a quarter million students with disabilities in the NYC public school system. My son is one of them. His first word – hiiii – didn't come until he was nearly three years old, but when it did, we both lost it. I cried because the sound of his voice as it formed around that word was the moment I knew he'd be okay, he would make it. And he cried because it plain shocked the hell out him.

Since then, I've learned to navigate the Special Education system by way of the Department of Education; this is an ongoing, often grueling and frustrating process. I have had to learn what is afforded to my child by law, under the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act, and to identify when his civil right to an "equal and appropriate education" (IDEA) has been violated. Together we have weathered the storm of the Early Intervention experience and subsequent clinical evaluation and diagnostic tests (beginning at age 2), secured a spot in a center-based preschool after having to apply and go through a harrowing vetting and admissions process, have attended dozens of IEP (Individualized Educational Plan) meetings with teachers, specialists, social workers, and DOE representatives, have benefitted from endless hours of therapy and interventions by fantastically devoted, skilled, and dedicated educators, and ultimately transitioned to a public school special education program (PS3) with an ICT (Integrated Co-Teaching) classroom designation on his IEP.

As a mother, I've had to watch my son work his ass off, to the point of complete mental and physical exhaustion, at an age when other kids were playing in the sandbox. A DOE-appointed behavioral therapist would show up at our apartment at 6 am, to help get through the process of simply getting dressed for school, which often took a good two hours of trial and error. And you know what? Ollie has never felt sorry for himself. He has never complained. He's made sacrifices and adjustments to his childhood routine that no child should have to make, and he's done it with grace, determination, and diligence. And the reason for this is quite simple: the kid loves to learn. Not the stuff a parent teaches – the daily talks about this and that, the conversations about the way the world works – he enjoys that, but I'm talking about straight-up academics, math and reading, writing, science, all of the lifelines of information that have finally opened up to him because of his IEP and the special education teachers who have given him access to his own, beautiful brain.

Since March of 2020, I've watched this joy for learning being slowly erased; with each day of remote learning, quarantines, school closures. With missing even more school bc of covid infection and now long covid.

I've witnessed an unraveling, a steady and powerful regression that has me up most nights worrying, scared for my child, knowing all too well how precarious his situation really is. It is so easy to forget your child is learning disabled when they are doing well. If anything, the pandemic & subsequent loss of supports and services has only reacquainted me with the gaps in Ollie's executive functioning, the number of ways in which his mind just closes shop if left to its own devices. Imagine years of watching learning steadily and carefully progress; years of therapy and services and tutoring giving way to words, to an entire language, to a way of communication with outside world; years of shapes and numbers finally adding-up, problems

becoming do-able, even fun; years of pinning every birthday party invite to the fridge because you still remember a time when there weren't any.

Now, imagine all of this being nearly wiped-out within half of a calendar year. This is the rate of regression that students with disabilities have been experiencing. For disabled students, an IEP is not only about receiving services it is also about, and perhaps even more about being in an ICT classroom with a teacher who is trained in special education. They need skilled professionals to offer different ways of engaging and keeping them on task, alternative methods of teaching the same grade-appropriate curriculum. An example of this would be a child with ADHD, which by definition "impacts attention and executive function". A child with ADHD often requires constant redirecting to stay on task, and this is given by someone who has been trained in not only recognizing the signs of distress, anxiety, and cognitive fallout, but in appropriately and efficiently addressing them in the moment, in real time, in person so they do not fall behind. Often the signs of regression are most visibly read in their body language, which by the way, cannot be read through a computer screen.

NYC has the highest number of students in special education programs in the nation, and yet, here we are. The discrimination and segregation these students are facing in the shadow of a pandemic is shutting them out of the classroom, all over again. Last year, NYC saw a 57% decline in referrals to Early Intervention, CPSE, & CSE. In my own son's school, a 46% decrease in ICT designations for 2022-23 has been projected.

Not affording our disabled students the basic right to a free and equal and appropriate education under the law is anti-democratic. It's anti-constitutional. And it's un-American. The Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act has roots in the same civil rights movement that gave life to groundbreaking decisions, such as Brown vs. The Board of Education. How can you pick and choose which laws, which civil rights to defend? Which poster goes up in your office? What sort of example is this setting for our kids? That you only step up and make noise until you get elected?

Mayor Adams' proposed budget cuts mean SWD's will have less services and support – and placement – not more. Less teachers, paras, training, DOE psychologists, case workers, and referrals. Students with disabilities are leaving the public school system bc the public school system LEFT THEM a long time ago. Opening a new public school for dyslexic students is not a solution; it's segregation. No SWD should have to go to a separate school to have their needs met. That IS NOT the least restrictive environment possible. It's mayoral showboating. And it's nothing new. And it needs to end.