

Information Brief

Youth Voice: My Thoughts on the Florida High School Diploma **By Matthew Murray**

I moved to Florida from New Jersey. In New Jersey, a student goes four years to a high school and earns a diploma, whether he has a disability or not. Florida, however, has what they call a “Special” diploma. Beware if you are classified ESE (a special education classification) because you will be boxed into this. Because of my classification, or misclassification, I received a special diploma even though I am a member of the National Honor Society/National Technical Honor Society. It will take me six years to get a standard diploma. I think it’s unfair and it is discriminatory.

I was born with Downs Syndrome. I started at an Early Intervention program at Saint John of God up in New Jersey when I was three weeks old. After that, I went to a preschool program for youth with disabilities for two years in my hometown. The teachers said that I couldn’t go any further so I went to a school that was for students with disabilities. This was a disaster. I liked to imitate people

and I started to imitate the bad behaviors of some of the students plus I started to lose some of my abilities I had learned. At this time, my brother's teacher, Sister Anne, sent home a catechism for me to learn about God. My mom was amazed at how quickly I could learn. It was then that my parents decided I needed to be in a regular school.

This took some doing. I was the first child with a visible mental disability to go to a regular school in the Sterling School District. The Child Study Team put their trust in me and I didn't disappoint them. Since fourth grade, with the help of some remarkable aides, I have been on the Honor Roll. When I graduated from eighth grade, I received a trophy for having high honors in both seventh and eighth grade. I also received the Knights of Columbus Award and the special award for the hope I gave other children with disabilities in school.

Before graduating, my parents and I visited several high schools. There was no doubt that I would graduate in four years and earn my diploma; the same diploma as everyone else.

Unfortunately, we moved to Florida. At the first IEP meeting, they told Mom and I that I would never pass the FCAT (Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test), it was too hard, and that I would

be getting a special diploma. They also changed my classification from Cognitively Impaired Mild to Trainable Mentally Handicapped. My mom objected and they said that they would test me. They did but they never changed my classification.

For the next four years, I took regular educational required classes. My ESE classes were in English and Math. Unfortunately, FCAT testing is in Math and Reading. I could never pass the FCAT with what I was learning in English and Math. It is important to know that I was a straight A student in all of my courses. Changing my classification was never discussed by the team, even though my mom would say it was wrong.

At the start of my junior year, my dad said that he wasn't happy about me getting a special diploma. He was worried about me getting a job and if I needed more education. Could I do it with a special diploma? I had met with a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor at the beginning of my freshman year but he said he wouldn't meet with me again until I was 18.

Then at Osceola Family Night, my parents picked up an interesting book. It's called "Transition, The Passage From Youth To Adulthood". It is put out by the Advocacy Center for Persons with Disabilities (1-

800-342-0823). This is a very good book. My parents were furious after reading this because I was not getting the services I needed. The school district didn't answer my dad's questions for over a year. In my Senior year, my dad and I requested Due Process under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). "Due process gives parents the right to advocate for their child when they are in disagreement with the school district over the content or implementation of the IEP. Under due process a parent can administratively, or in a court of law, pursue the services or other educationally related aspects they believe are necessary to ensure their child receives FAPE." (IDEA Overview, Committee on Education and Labor, U.S. House of Representatives, 2004.)

Through the efforts of a very good school board member, I was accepted to TECO/PATHS where I am earning my standard diploma. They have also changed my classification to Educable Mentally Handicapped. I have an excellent teacher there. Last year, I passed the Math part of the FCAT and this year I have high hopes of passing the reading. It took me six years but this coming May, I will receive my standard diploma. I now will be able to go for technical training, a

community college, or maybe a four year college-- the choice will be mine!

Due Process was withdrawn because the school district did change my classification. But how about the ESE kids whose father didn't complain or who didn't get help from their school board member. Can you believe in the four years I went to Celebration High School, I never met with my guidance counselor, he never talked to me about any plans or desires I had for my future. I don't think any ESE student got time with a guidance counselor. When you receive a special diploma, no one seems to care what happens to you after graduating. This is why it is unfair and discriminatory. It separates you from the rest of your class. It makes you feel like a loser. There should be one diploma with equal guidance and care for ALL students, no matter what their capabilities are.

Resources for Additional Information

Early Intervention Program, New Jersey: <http://www.njeis.com/>

Advocacy Center for People with Disabilities:
<http://www.advocacycenter.org>

Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test:
<http://firn.edu/doe/sas/fcat.htm>

TECO/PATHS: <http://www.teco.osceola.k12.fl.us/pages/TABE.htm>

Due Process:
<http://www.pattan.k12.pa.us/ODR/DueProcessFAQ.htm>

U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Education and Labor
<http://edlabor.house.gov/publications/IDEAOverview.pdf>

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Check out our website for new products and exciting updates!
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