

A TRUE ACCOUNT BY THE SINGLE MOM OF AN AUTISTIC CHILD

(The identity of the Mom won't be revealed, but if you want to know who she is, the information can be provided.)

I attended the School Board of Broward County's (SBBC) staff development trainings, including a two-day program on behavior, a workshop called "Skills for School Success," a three-day workshop called "Orientation for Teachers Working with Autism." I attended another staff development training on developing Individual Education Plans (IEPs), and the first of five new Exceptional Student Education (ESE) Specialist meetings. All of these trainings were in 2002.

At the first ESE Specialist meeting, the district's Area ESE Coordinator wanted to know who had informed me about the meeting. I reminded her that I was supposed to be notified of all ESE meetings countywide so that I could attend those that were relevant to my son's situation. The Coordinator had personally provided me with the Summer Teachers' Academy materials from which I selected the courses that I would attend. Furthermore, she had phoned me and informed me of the dates for the next four meetings in that series. The next meeting in that series of five was scheduled for October 18, 2002.

On September 9, 2002, I had filed a state complaint with the Florida Department of Education regarding the SBBC's failure to provide appropriate Extended School Year (ESY) services pursuant to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). I filed that complaint on behalf of my son and other children who were eligible to receive ESY. I prevailed on that complaint.

I filed my first due process on September 17, 2002. I assisted other parents whose disabled children had experienced similar abuse and discrimination at the same school. Within days of my due process action, five due process actions were filed relating to actions against students with disabilities at the same school.

Clearly, the SBBC wanted to teach a lesson to me and other parents considering filing due process actions. I and two of the other Moms who had filed due process arrived at the school where the October 18 training was to be held. Outside the school two plain clothed people who did not identify themselves (and who had no identification showing) physically accosted me. I thought I was being mugged. Instead, these two people were "School Resource Officers" (SROs) who proceeded to handcuff and physically abuse me. I am not even 5 feet 2 inches tall and I weigh little more than 100 pounds. Additionally, I have a severe case of Type 1 diabetes and require a pump to keep my insulin levels stable.

The SROs dragged me into the school and kept me in the lobby, handcuffed, for all to see. Neither of the two other Moms was arrested, even though they were all in the very same place at the very same time. Of the other two Moms present, one had settled her due process action. The district took absolutely no action against the Mom who had settled, but subsequently filed against the other Mom who, as I did, had not signed any settlement agreement.

It is interesting that the district filed complaints against the two parents who had outstanding due process actions, but that no complaint was filed against the one who had settled her due process action. It is even more interesting that the Mom who helped other parents and who advocated for

the rights of disabled children was not only treated inappropriately, but she was also physically abused.

I had to receive treatment for my injuries in an emergency room.

Unfortunately, the SBBC's retaliation continues. Now, when I attend my son's IEP meetings, the district insists on sending a team of personnel. These district personnel run the meeting and make every attempt to direct/persuade/coerce the real members of the IEP team, the people who know and work with the child.

As recently as March 14, 2005, when I went to attend my son's properly scheduled and noticed IEP meeting, the district refused to allow the IEP meeting take place because they wanted district people to attend. This meeting date was critical because one of the people who had work with my son was going on maternity leave before another meeting could be held, to the detriment my son.

I was also the victim of the eight people who voted for the three among them who lost the April 2004 elections for positions on the ESE District Advisory Executive Committee. They kept making charges of "illegality" in the elections, in actions taken by the Committee and the general membership, and caused the meetings to become chaotic. Dr. Earlean Smiley, Deputy for Curriculum and Instruction, was asked to help, and she quickly had them controlled and the meetings were orderly. She wisely brought a school police officer with her!

Then they began emailing a School Board member with the accusations after they lost the vote on eliminating the Nominating Committee. A registered Parliamentarian ruled against them. The School Board member chose to ignore me as duly elected Chair of the Advisory and demanded the records of the members and their attendance that determined voting privileges from the volunteer who kept the records. She is an attorney for Legal Aid and the Mom of a child with a disability. She redacted the names of the members and handed them to the district personnel, who refused to accept them. When she emailed the Board member that since the parents didn't know when they signed in that their names would be considered public record she couldn't provide them, the Board member, as written in previous accounts, emailed Dr. Smiley that this parent could "...kiss my a--." Board member Beverly Gallagher opined in an email that the district should suspend the Advisory, without having spoken with either the Mom or myself.

The Superintendent instructed his ESE Director to take over the Advisory and suspended the entire Executive Committee, even though it had never had time to meet to discuss the situation and the district cited nothing in policy, bylaws or law that provided for such an action.

Even though Board Attorney Marko opined the names were public record, since the "takeover" the district has printed a disclosure on the bottom of the sign-in sheets telling the signatories that it is public record. This disclosure was never there before the Mom/Legal Aid attorney raised the issue. Obviously she had a point well made.

Now you see the retaliation that hangs over the head of any ESE parent who dares to stand up for a child's rights, or demands redress of grievances. This of course, will not deter us from fighting for these rights. We shall simply take a new course, working from a private not-for-profit corporation so that the district cannot employ the despotic tactics it is used to.