

## Story of Lazor Family Shows Arlington Schools Can Get It Right

By Jay Mathews  
Thursday, April 6, 2006; VA05

Parents of children with learning disabilities all have complicated stories to tell, but Paula Lazor may have set a record for twists and turns, victories and defeats. Her most frustrating moment was when she found the perfect program for her son John, a special education student, only to be told by school officials that he could not enroll *because* he was a special education student.

I think telling stories of special education families is the best way to cut through the confusion and bewilderment associated with learning disabilities. Just reciting all the inexplicable legalities is not enough; the rules are too hard to comprehend and are a huge bore. But a single family's story can shed light on what actually goes on, and why.

In the case of Lazor's family, there was a happy ending. The school system they dealt with, Arlington County, proved not to be the villain but one of the heroes. The way Arlington reacted to Lazor's distress, and to its own clumsy rules, should be a model for other school systems.

From kindergarten through sixth grade, John was an average student, Lazor said. In first grade, he was designated as learning disabled after his teacher noticed his reading was below grade level. But he was also very bright, and small accommodations such as letting him sit near the teacher and allowing him to type his homework allowed him to keep up with his class.

Eventually his parents learned that his disability was slow processing speed and audio-visual integration. "That meant when he listened to you speak to him, his brain processed the information a split second after he heard it," Lazor said. "Note taking, in particular, was a nightmare for him because he wasn't able to look at the teacher while he was taking the notes. Since he couldn't keep up with the teacher's pace of talking, he missed information."

None of this was so clear at first, as assignments piled up and John fell behind his classmates at Swanson Middle School. In seventh grade he had a meltdown.

"He stayed awake half the night crying uncontrollably," Lazor said. "He said he could not go back to school. We were at a loss of what to do. We called the pediatrician. When John, again in tears, refused to go to school a second day, the doctor referred us to a child psychiatrist."

The family began the long succession of recovery followed by heartbreak, followed by recovery, followed by heartbreak, that special education children and their parents know too well. The psychiatrist was able to treat John's anxiety. His guidance counselor got his homework load reduced. But a few days into eighth grade he began falling asleep in class.

John reluctantly agreed to switch to math and English classes for special education students, and then transferred to Arlington's Interlude program -- small, nurturing classes for students who are not able to function academically in the regular classroom.

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Sleeping specialists at Children's Hospital found John had an abnormal sleep pattern, with very little REM sleep during the night. The diagnosis was narcolepsy, a neurological disorder caused by the absence of neurotransmitters in the hypothalamus region of the brain. He began taking a drug for that condition and had success for awhile in two separate stints at the private New School of Northern Virginia. But he struggled academically and had to return to Arlington's Washington-Lee High School.

Hoping to share what they had learned, Lazor and her husband spoke at an Arlington School Board meeting to recommend that school officials look into the possibility that other children might be affected by narcolepsy. Later, they joined other parents in speaking out at another school board meeting about the need for a program for gifted children with learning disabilities. Board member Libby Garvey asked Alvin Crawley, assistant superintendent for student services, to look into it.

Lazor and her husband also discovered a promising program at the Arlington Career Center. John was interested in its industrial arts courses because he wanted to go to a tech school instead of college. But school officials told Lazor that John could not be accepted into the program because it "did not accept students with IEPs."

Indeed, county officials told me recently, they had never had a student with an IEP apply to the program before and did not have special education staff for it.

John saw no alternative but to drop out of high school and earn his general equivalency diploma instead. In the weird way that school rules often work, it was this decision that allowed him to take the courses at the Career Center that he had been denied when he was still a registered student. Under Arlington's Individualized Student Alternative Education Program, he could prepare for the GED in special county classes. These included the Career Center vocational courses he was eager to try. "John did so well in his auto tech class that his instructor, Mike McGhee, moved him up to Auto Tech II the second half of the year," Lazor said.

Lazor and her husband showed up at another school board meeting to suggest that school counselors offer the GED/ISAEP to more kids like John and publicize the program on the school district Web site. They also hired a lawyer who sent a letter to the School Board, saying the district was in violation of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act for refusing to admit students with IEPs into Career Center programs.

When lawyers get involved in special education cases, relations often turn ugly, but not this time. Arlington Superintendent Robert G. Smith thanked them for the letter and said plans were underway to fix the problem.

John is now 19 and enrolled at Universal Technical Institute, an auto tech school, in Exton, Pa. "The school is a perfect fit," Lazor said. "He studies one course at a time, six hours a day, and five days a week . . . John is on the honor roll at UTI. To date, he hasn't missed a day of school."

Last fall Lazor called the Career Center and confirmed that Smith had followed through with his promise to let students with IEPs into the program. She said she is also happy that the district set up a program for gifted students with learning disabilities at Wakefield High School.

I have kept a close eye on Arlington County since I was assigned to cover its schools in 1997. It has been blessed with a smart School Board that has been wise in its choice of superintendents. It also benefits from an old political tradition that prefers leaders who keep an open mind when parents complain.

It is, of course, impossible to satisfy everyone, but staying in touch with families in trouble and not ruling out options without some thought seems to me the best way to handle the unique difficulties of special education, and to find the right solutions for students like John.

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