

A Chance to Learn

by Angelica Gomez

From the Editor: The best reading method for a child with low vision is often a topic for debate. However, it seems safe to assume that a totally blind student naturally will be taught to read Braille. Yet in some cases, Braille instruction is not provided, even to totally blind children. If a blind child has or is thought to have additional disabilities, Braille may be deemed inappropriate--even when sighted children with similar disabilities are taught to read print. The story of Melanie Gomez, an eight-year-old blind girl from Florida, is an example of what can happen.



Our daughter Melanie started preschool when she was three years old. She was in a class where some of the children had disabilities and some did not. She was the only totally blind child in the group. We felt it was a good program, and Melanie seemed to be doing well.

Melanie was in that program for two years, but when she began kindergarten she had to switch schools. The new school placed her in a class for autistic children, even though Melanie had not been diagnosed with autism. My husband and I really didn't understand what was going on. We trusted the school. We thought the people at the school were experts, and we believed they would do everything possible to help Melanie learn.

Pretty soon, though, we started to get worried. Sometimes Melanie came home with scratches, bruises, and even bites from the other children in her class. She became afraid of loud noises, and she didn't like to play with her cousins anymore. If one of them went up to her, Melanie would scream and push her away.

We told the school we wanted Melanie to be placed in a class with other blind children. The school said a placement like that wouldn't work because Melanie didn't know Braille. "But how can she know Braille?" I asked them. "No one has tried to teach her." They would send her homework home all in print. Nothing was tactile, not even the pictures she was supposed to color. How could she learn anything from those worksheets? To her they were just blank pieces of paper!

One day when I had something else to do, my husband, Jimmy, attended Melanie's IEP meeting without me. He came home very confused. He said he didn't understand most of the things they were saying. We decided to call for another IEP meeting so both of us could be there.

The school was not happy about calling a new meeting, but they went along with our request. Some of the teachers made impatient remarks, and I saw a few of them texting or talking on their cell phones during the meeting. We found out that they had labeled Melanie autistic and learning disabled. They tried to tell us she couldn't learn because she had those other disabilities besides being blind.

After that meeting, we were very upset. We felt the school was holding Melanie back. She was getting speech therapy, and one day I asked the speech therapist what we could do. She was very sympathetic. She really listened to us, and after we talked, she got us an advocate. That's when our battle with the Dade County School District really began!

When Melanie was in first grade we went to a whole series of meetings, some local and some regional. The school got a lawyer, and so did we. I believe the people at Melanie's school really thought they were giving her what she needed. But they were convinced that she couldn't learn reading or cane travel or much of anything else. It turned out that the district's department of services for the visually impaired didn't even know that Melanie existed!

Our local lawyer ended up bringing in Sharon Krevor-Weisbaum, an attorney with Brown, Goldstein and Levy in Baltimore. That firm has a lot of experience with cases involving blind children. They helped us get a full assessment, and the report showed that Melanie should be getting Braille and cane travel. In mediation the school

agreed to place Melanie in a class for blind children. It also agreed to help her make up for all her lost time by paying for Braille instruction during three summers. This summer Melanie and I will spend two weeks in Baltimore while she attends the Maryland BELL Program (Braille Enrichment for Leadership and Learning). We are both totally excited!

Melanie is eight years old now, and she attends a class with two other blind children. She knows the whole alphabet in Braille, and she loves to write with her Perkins Braille. Teachers from New York and Louisiana have come to observe her. They are amazed by the progress she has made.

I'll never forget one of our meetings, when the school's lawyer started off by announcing, "I'm not here to have my time wasted!" It is very sad when a person like that says such a thing in front of two parents who want the best for their child! It was my daughter's time that was being wasted by a school that didn't believe in her and didn't care. Melanie was being pushed aside. The more she fell behind, the less chance she had to show her capabilities.

I know there are many Melanies out there, children who haven't been so fortunate to get the help our daughter received. I am very, very grateful to everyone who helped us in our fight to get Melanie the chance to learn. I hope that other families will benefit from our experience so their children can have the excitement of learning that Melanie is enjoying at last.

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