

# Out-of-the-Box Thinkers in a Standardized Classroom

To be a child who doesn't learn in typical ways has never been easy. Fortunately, we live in a time when educators understand learning disabilities better than ever, and have more creative tools at their disposal for helping these kids. At the same time, public school teachers are under mounting public pressure to produce students with high standardized test scores and to teach to a standardized "common core" curriculum. All too often, the result is that public school classrooms—the very places where federal law guarantees learning-disabled children equal access to education—are increasingly inhospitable to them.

This makes it all the more important to take a look at how well Prince George's County public schools are at actually delivering services. To that end, the Prince George's County SECAC surveyed\* parents of children with various kinds of learning disabilities to see what they thought. Here are a few highlights from what the sixty-one respondents told us:

- A majority of the parents—70 percent—reported that their child had a current 504 Plan or an IEP. Only two percent said their child had a disability but had been denied either an IEP or a 504.
- The **number one issue** affecting these children is some kind of **executive functioning** disability: 75 percent have a disorder in which this is a prominent feature.
- Only 11 percent said that their child's teacher routinely posts homework assignments on the internet, even though this is the most efficient means of communication for children who have trouble keeping track of paperwork, not to mention their parents. **The most common answer to the question, "What kind of communication would you most like to get from your child's teacher?" was "homework assignments."**
- Only seven percent of the parents said that their child "always" received the classroom accommodations he was entitled to under his IEP or 504 Plan. Thirty-four percent said their child "mostly" got these accommodations, and another 48 percent said their child **got those accommodations "sometimes."** (Eighteen percent said their child did not always ask for the accommodations.)
- Learning disabilities frequently are accompanied by problems with social skills, and 75 percent of the parents in the survey said that their children had challenges relating to their peers. **Fifty-six percent said that their child had been a victim of bullying**, and 28 percent of that group believed the bullying was directly related to their child's learning disability.

- **Twenty-seven percent reported that their child's school had placed limitations on their child's participation in field trips**, usually by requiring a parent to accompany the child—a practice which in all but a few narrowly defined circumstances, has been interpreted by courts as a violation of federal disability laws. Another 34 percent said they believed that their child had on occasion been disciplined for behavior directly related to his or her learning disability.
- 34 percent of the children in the survey were identified as Talented and Gifted (TAG). Of those, 60 percent said that their child's teachers gave them opportunities to explore their talents and gifts, but only **13 percent said that their child had access to a GSLN program**. The rest of the parents of this group either replied that they did not have access to GSLN programming or did not know whether or not their child had such access.

Getting supports for these students is critical. These are kids who are, for the most part, keenly aware of their differences and who want very much to manage their work independently and have positive peer relationships. As parents and educators, we need to work together to figure out how to accommodate for the disabilities while teaching the skills so our students with learning disabilities can reach their full potential in a safe, collaborative environment that meets them where they are.

*\*This survey was co-written by Tracy Content and Sarah Wayland, with advice and insight from Marilyn Clune and Beth McCracken-Harness. Results were gathered by advertising the location of the online survey (on the SECAC home page) via local media and education list-serves throughout the county, letters to PTAs of every school in the county, and via passing out hard copies of the survey at the 2013 Back To School Fair. Sixty-one parents responded.*