

My name is Mary Jane Williams and I am from Katy, TX. I am here today not only as Christopher's mom, but also representing Family to Family Network, a parent organization in Houston. Family to Family Network's mission is to help families with kids with disabilities or chronic illness by providing information, training, referral and support. We help families navigate the complex medical, social service and educational systems.

Family to Family Network believes that all children with disabilities should be given the opportunity to pursue their dreams. For some kids, it is easier than for others...but regardless of disability - we believe all children have value and belong in their communities. Families (and educators) must have a vision for a child's future - it shouldn't be any different than if a child didn't have a disability label. Without a vision - it is hard to plan at ARD meetings each year. Those yearly meetings are the roadmap to the future outcomes...be it further education, employment or independent living.

We believe that families and educators need to work together in reaching those goals for the future. I did not expect the educators to "cure my son of autism", but I did expect them to teach him, to provide the services he needed (not necessarily what I wanted), and to have high expectations as well. I know that my son wasn't the easiest to teach early on...but I knew he could learn. Yet, I also knew school couldn't do it all - I had to work hard with him at home too. He didn't communicate much until he was in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade...and I appreciate the teachers and support staff that stumbled along the path with us through those early years of inclusive education. Yes, it would have been a lot easier to segregate Christopher - but I knew he wouldn't want to live a segregated life when he graduated. so he needed to learn early on what it meant to be part of a community.

I am lucky - I got involved with a great parent organization early in my child's life. I learned my rights and responsibilities. I learned to negotiate for what my son and daughter needed. It was, and still is, a give and take relationship. I made many friends along the way in the staff that supported my children. I volunteered and gave back to the school community to help all kids in the school.

There were not always times when we agreed on everything. There were times when I needed to follow through on the special education process. When I tried my best to work with the school, and things were not going the way they needed for my son and many other children in the district - I knew I had to follow through with a complaint to benefit not only my son, but others. Parents need to know their rights and responsibilities and to ask questions. Educators need to answer the questions truthfully and understand that parents are usually acting in their child's best interest. Parents need to understand that usually the educators are there to help our children also. But parents need to follow through...

There were times I needed to apologize and start again - something educators and parents need to do after a tough year...because it is about the child, not the adults around the table.

There are some great teachers out there and I know many of them would do whatever they need to do for our children. But often their hands get tied by districts. School districts are financially strapped for cash and the first place that cuts seem to take place are in the special education department....for students who have the most to lose. Districts are trying to provide services, but they have learned to provide services to kids whose parents are “the loudest”....I worry about kids whose parents might not speak the language, parents who may not have the education or knowledge I have, or must work many jobs just to keep a roof over their head – Their children are often left floundering. And as a society – we will pay for this later. Education must help all children regardless of economics.

We need to think smarter, not harder, about special education. Just because that is the way it has always been done doesn't mean it is the way it needs to be done in the future. We need to remember that special education is a service, and not a place. I have seen too many Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for children that have so many things to work on in one year – Are we trying to do too much? We all, parents and educators, need to be reminded to focus on the big things – The things that are going to make a difference for students in the future. I am not saying that we give up on kids and not do anything....but we must focus on student needs – not based on budgets, on available personnel, or our own wish lists. Are the decisions we are making around the table going to make a difference in the child's future....in achieving their dreams for life after high school? If not, then we need to move on, start over, regroup.... We must think smarter.

In the end = we are building a puzzle we call life.

# **We ALL Have a Role on An Effective Team:**

**The most effective plans are designed when differing perspectives come together, work in a collaborative and creative manner, staying focused on the needs of the child.**

## **❖ *Have a Vision***

*What are the hopes & dreams of the child? Where are they going after school is over? How steps will it take to get there? Map out a plan, because every decision, every action, is a piece of the puzzle that impacts a child's life.*

## **❖ *Become Informed***

*Take that vision and find someone who can help you begin to move towards that goal. Parents and educators don't have all the answers; they both need to learn more. Join organizations, Get involved in schools/communities, Educate yourself.*

## **❖ *Establish Relationships***

*Communicate effectively, Collaborate, Ask for support, Ask what works for each child, Practice Respect, and Be Willing to "Begin Again", Presume competence. Networking with others is a key to building support for yourself and the child.*

## **❖ *Be Goal Oriented***

*What does the child need and will it make a difference for their future, Be creative, Share things BEFORE the ARD meeting, Get everything in writing, Be the Parent/Teacher.*

## **❖ *Keep Communicating***

*Let people know when you are concerned, Stay on top of IEP progress, Develop a communication tool & keep lines of*

*communication open, Remember communication is a two way process – listen and acknowledge before offering an opinion, Don't make ARD meetings an Annual event – rather an ongoing process.*

❖ ***Be Prepared***

*Stay informed of changing laws & policies, Call an organization to seek support, request/share goals & objectives & evaluations before the ARD meeting, Keep your own data, Talk to parent/teacher/evaluator to see clarification, Before the meeting – collaborate on Present levels and strengths & needs of student.*

❖ ***Practice Flexibility***

*Try to understand the other perspective, Don't rush an ARD meeting, Inform parties of time issues ahead of time and plan to reschedule, Be child focused and stay positive.*

❖ ***Be Supported***

*Get to know other families, Get to know colleagues, Share ideas and work together, Explore the possibilities. Parents- You are your child's best advocate...your best source of support may be that friend, neighbor, or another parent of a child with a disability. Thank teachers – often they are there because they love kids. Teachers – you can give a huge gift to a child and parents by empowering parents to be the experts they already are on their children.*

❖ ***Have Fun Along The Way – Celebrate a Lot!***

❖ ***“The Strength of the Team is each individual member, and the strength of each member is the Team” – Coach P Jackson, Chicago Bulls***

❖ ***Working together, we are building a puzzle called REAL LIFE.***