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Excuse me, your FAPE is showing

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Is it in-person or virtual? We are all too familiar with this question since the Covid pandemic changed how we interact with each other. In particular, students and parents receiving Special Education services were forced to “adapt” to support educational needs within their homes. Making this sudden and unexpected switch exacerbated systemic inequities and challenged the true meanings of LRE (Least Restrictive Environment) and FAPE (Free Appropriate Public Education) as identified under IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). My experience with my daughter and her IEP team gave me moments of joy and understanding I didn’t have prior to Covid, but it also came alongside with frustrations and concerns as society keeps moving forward.

Since our school shut down on March 16, 2020 until now, I've been my daughter's in-person 1:1 SEA, therapy assistant, and Zoom extraordinaire. This change has been a roller coaster ride with plenty of ups and downs and I empathize with any other families feeling the same way. I can plan and strategize with the best of intentions to keep a day routine, but there are plenty of times my daughter reminds me that play and fun opportunities need to be embraced as they naturally occur.

Which prompts the question: What really is a "Least Restrictive Environment"? During Math, Reading, Writing, Art, and Music instruction, my daughter's Special Ed teacher is able to present information in a way completely catered to her unique learning style. She was already an entrusted and respected teacher in my daughter's eyes from the 4K and 5K grades, which has allowed me to share expectations amidst our home environment. While fewer distractions and amplified growth in certain areas of school has been a benefit, we had to accept that her general education science and geography classes were not easily broken down and the screen time needed to participate was not in my daughter's best interest. All these factors played into our version of a "Least Restrictive Environment".

That said, "Free Appropriate Public Education" is present when the term "Appropriate" is honored to its fullest potential. It was appropriate to switch to virtual learning and stay there. It was appropriate that we focused on specific classes that will enrich my daughter's academic career for years to come. It was appropriate that her teachers and I worked as a team to make all of this possible. Moving forward, I expect nothing less, in fact, I expect more.

Covid has shown us that a virtual option **can** be and **should** be offered in the future to students who require unique levels of support. It has made us rethink how we communicate with friends and strangers alike. The world has been through a very traumatizing ordeal that begs us to not only pick up the pieces as we start to return to a sense of normality, it DEMANDS that we do better for our Special Education students. Do better for our community, do better for our future, do better for our kids.