



Autism Resources Fair 2024

Transcript of Out-of-District Placement: How to Know When It's Right for Your Child with John J. Mulholland, Jr.

00;00;05;08 - 00;00;25;13

John

again, thank you for that, very warm introduction. And of course, thank you for the opportunity to be out here today at this. It's, I mean, it's incredible that this event has been in place for seven years, and it continues to grow and continues to tackle different topics in the best way possible and like bringing together all types of providers and, community groups.

00;00;25;18 - 00;00;41;17

John

just to give a little more background about ASAH, because it might be relevant about some of the things we talk about. It's, it is an org, as we said in the introduction, it is an organization about highly specialized schools. It's existed for it was founded in 1974. So we're gonna be celebrating our 50th anniversary this year.

00;00;41;22 - 00;01;10;05

John

And and this will come into, this worth thinking about when we come through the topic that we're going to talk about today is, is whether or not an out of district placement is right for a student and or your child. It's it's and that goes in two ways. One, is it right from the perspective of navigating the legal federal, you know, the federal legal process with your school district, but also whether or not it's right from the perspective of whether it makes sense for your child from just trying to figure out what's best for them as a parent.

00;01;10;07 - 00;01;30;39

John

And we'll talk about both those lines. And so I think it's important to consider both those. And so with that in mind, as it does a lot of different things, one of them is this partnership with families doing things like we're doing today, coming out to both these are table at events,

provide provide information, provide substantive knowledge. It's also worth noting we have a free parents assistance line.

00;01;30;44 - 00;01;54;25

John

And we're a, we're a 501c3 that's dedicated to supporting students with special needs and their families. So they assist far beyond out of district placements. It's truly for any child that needs some help navigating the IEP process or, you know, working the 504 process or something. So we would call our main line and there's an extension for our for our, you know, parent assistance line services.

00;01;54;30 - 00;02;36;17

John

and our parent advocate gets back very promptly. and so it's worth noting, when we start thinking about the broad spectrum of placements for students, as you heard a little bit in the last presentation, you're really looking at the, the individual child and the individual student what they need. Some of that could be providing additional resources in their existing public school placement, a whole variety of resources that could involve, you know, you know, from from accommodations to, you know, things like help from testing to one on one aides, you know, even if student nurses, if there's a medical issue, sometimes that can be a consideration of perhaps sending to another public school

00;02;36;17 - 00;02;59;59

John

district. So if a neighboring district has a, has a, a vibrant, you know, autism program, perhaps the decision would be to send them to that district. Counties will set up public options these are sometimes called uh, county county special service districts or service commissions or joint charters. And then beyond that tier, it's more that's where where, the idea of private schools are in the state.

00;02;59;59 - 00;03;22;25

John

We have kind of two types. There's actually what the state calls approved private schools for students with disabilities. And it's important to recognize those are state approved schools. They meet a very rigorous standard to get that approval, that accreditation and they're governed by very strict set of regulations, both that govern that, you know, in terms of program reviews, making sure there's in compliance and using the best educational practices.

00;03;22;30 - 00;03;44;21

John

If you're in an approved school, every every staff member has the same certification. So it would be required in any of those public placements. And similarly that they're very accountable for every dollar they spend to ensure that they're being done for the educational

and support outcomes of students. But federal law also requires that the best option be available for students.

00;03;44;21 - 00;04;15;18

John

So if that isn't even a approved private school for students with disabilities there is something else in Naples act that allows consideration of unapproved schools if they have something to offer, if it's that highly specialized nature, and then even beyond that, out of state placements and things. So really, this gets into what you heard a little bit about this concept of IDEA and how every student is allowed to have a free or is required to have a free of appropriate public education, it's important they recognize that public in that sense, means publicly provided.

00;04;15;23 - 00;04;40;46

John

So and I think that that's probably the first thing that parents need to know is that there are options and that this is a part it's an option if it's appropriate for children. And sometimes that's a big battle on two levels. One, making sure that there's a comfort on the side of the parent in the family to think about whether it makes sense to broach that topic as part of your yknow, as part of your, as part of a participant in the child's study team.

00;04;40;51 - 00;05;05;42

John

And then and on the other hand, it's also thinking about how to make the case to the school district and ideally, the collaborative process. But when good faith disagreements happen, sometimes that requires other types of advocacy, whether it's just a student or a parent advocate or perhaps attorneys. But again, the important thing is that every student in this country has a right to a free and appropriate public education.

00;05;05;42 - 00;05;30;01

John

And so that's probably the biggest takeaway here, is that part of getting that education is a consideration of all those options. So that's where it's worth recognizing that both ASAH and approved private schools for students with disabilities really take pride in that partnership with schools like the student educated in and out of district placement is a public school student that remains the responsibility of our sending district.

00;05;30;06 - 00;05;59;45

John

And they're only being sent because they're not able to appropriately provide for the educational and other needs of that child. But it is ultimately a partnership. And so that's important to recognize. And similarly, we, you know, we we take, you know, accountability for outcomes very seriously. And I think it's also important to recognize that. So a big piece to remember is despite being referred to sometimes that's when you think about private school.

00;05;59;50 - 00;06;24;00

John

They're available at no cost to parents. That's often a big, you know, lack of consideration is this idea that that somehow parents would have to pay and that even generally includes transportation as well. So those are big misnomers. A lot of times, particularly individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, they hear the word private, and they don't want to actually consider the option because they go, oh, I don't have the resources to pay for a private school.

00;06;24;05 - 00;06;41;37

John

And that's part of the reason why, even in our own internal messaging, we try our best not to just refer to them as private schools. And they really aren't. They are ultimately state approved specialized schools. So sometimes I'll say that they're, they're privately run, the privately run providers of public education, because again, what that is, what they're doing.

00;06;41;37 - 00;06;53;27

John

They're providing that federal mandate for public education. So so I guess with that, I'm going to try to talk through a little a few things really worth considering in that that option,

00;06;53;27 - 00;07;03;19

John

just to re-emphasize. And so of course it's one of your options are our district placements. I do continue to mean the whole gamut. Again, that could be another public school district, like the school district down the road.

00;07;03;19 - 00;07;18;23

John

That could be some kind of county arranged public education option. That could be an AP SSD. So that's mostly what I'm most familiar with. But that's also an approved private school for students with disabilities or a school that's a Naples school or an out or out of state placement. Right.

00;07;18;23 - 00;07;26;05

John

so so this is how it's defined state law and state regulation. It's an approved private school for students with disabilities,

00;07;26;05 - 00;07;37;48

John

And as you as you can. As I alluded to, there's a lot of problems with that name. And when we work, we're actually contemplating whether or not the law revision Commission should really look at a different name for that and try to advocate for that.

00;07;37;48 - 00;07;59;52

John

And part of the challenges, I think, again, people especially when it's in statutes and it's not capitalized. People don't think that we're a bucket of regulated schools like you think about traditional public schools and private school, right? I guess traditional public schools and charter schools and Renaissance schools. Now to meet certain roles, AP SSDs are more comparable to that. They have to get a state approval.

00;07;59;57 - 00;08;17;42

John

They have to all their budgets are tightly regulated. But if you look at that as a sentence of words that are lowercase, and I know it's kind of a funny point, but I guess we are in a library and, you know, words matter and the way things are presented matters. whenever I sent an email or write a document, I capitalize all five of those letters because it is a is a proper noun.

00;08;17;47 - 00;08;29;38

John

They are approved private schools for students with disabilities. But if you saw that as a lowercase sentence and this is half my challenge on the advocacy side, they think it's just private schools. It just happened to be approved on a case by case basis.

00;08;29;38 - 00;08;52;01

John

And I think that that's another problem, too, is so often both from a lack of information provided to parents and often because of some poor philosophy in traditional public schools. If a student is actually referred out early on in life, the likelihood of the return to the public school, with or without support, is very brave. So and that's I think that that's I think we kind of intuitively know that.

00;08;52;01 - 00;09;17;00

John

But the evidence backs it up that the earlier the intervention the better. I mean, we do an annual outcomes study that shows that fact because we, we fight that this, that that misconception a lot, both with parents and also with school districts. There's a lot of school districts that philosophically think it's better for a younger child to stay in their school until they become so much of a "problem" in their minds, not my word, that they need to be referred out.

00;09;17;05 - 00;09;34;41

John

But really the opposite, that if you were to get that child that need it when they were younger and could actually respond to the interventions in the education, they're very likely to come back to their school district. I could actually give you a copy of our outcomes study after this presentation that you can look at and we publish that online as well.

00;09;34;46 - 00;09;50;23

John

And that's something that if you get an access on the top of all of our minds. And again, I think it's worth emphasizing that every student is different. So depending on the level of their needs and severity, and there are some students who do, regardless of when they end up in a place out in district placement, they might graduate out of it.

00;09;50;28 - 00;10;10;33

John

But and that might be the right thing for them. I, something, depending if we get to it or not. we're going to talk a little bit about myths about least restrictive environment, but and, and that's a, that's a legal term of course, but one, it's important to remember that that should always be, evaluated on the individual student.

00;10;10;38 - 00;10;34;26

John

It's not some concept. We, we, we kind of think that the word environment is probably problematic and really should be the least restrictive experience, because at the end of the day, if your student remains in what might be termed a mainstream environment that spends every day in the resource room and isn't able to participate in, you know, school activities, that's not that's not a beneficial arrangement.

00;10;34;31 - 00;10;51;42

John

And what happens in a lot of these out of district placements is the experience, why I took on this role, and I'm still in the process of trying to get out to every single one of my members, but it feels like a school in almost every instance. There's of course, some schools that require such a little intervention might not feel like traditional, so for the most part, they feel like a school.

00;10;51;42 - 00;11;15;05

John

And why do they feel like a school? Because it is a school. You have teachers teaching subject matters. You have sometimes. Sometimes just depending on the age of some of my students in classes, you know, switching class, sometimes, pushing activities, a lot of times the opportunity to participate in athletics in an actual way, not as not as a support role, but really playing sport, perhaps serving on a student council.

00;11;15;10 - 00;11;33;06

John

So in some ways, there's this misnomer that by going out of district, you're going to have somehow a less a less full experience. But depending on the philosophy and the resources of the public school, that might be farther from the truth than you can imagine. Right?

00;11;33;11 - 00;11;50;42

John

and again. Again. That's why if you think it's an option again, that's it really needs to be considered holistically. And that's why, you know, if you were to bring that up with your child study team, you would go out and see this school and these are the kind of questions that you'd ask. Our website actually has a checklist of things that you should ask and think about and consider.

00;11;50;47 - 00;12;13;46

John

a lot of schools, even, you know, one of the when we think about the concept of mainstreaming, a lot of our schools also try to participate with area schools and have other opportunities as well. If that's a that's a concern. But, you know, similarly sometimes you're going to you know, sometimes you talk to some of the teachers in schools that say, and I'm just being candid, but they say that I have a student who came up to me that I, you know, it's like I'm so happy in the school.

00;12;13;46 - 00;12;37;06

John

This is the first time I felt like my teacher liked me again. That's not in every situation, but it's, you know, sometimes the sense of actually being able to feel like you're belonging can be more powerful than perhaps striving for an ideal that works in, say, 95% of the cases. And I think that that's probably the biggest takeaway here, is that every student's need really is individualized.

00;12;37;10 - 00;12;49;31

John

And it's a, And that's and how do we get there? We get there by understanding what you want for your child, and we get there from understanding what the child wants for themselves, depending on their age, of course, and then what the experts do in their evaluations.

00;12;49;43 - 00;13;13;00

John

There's a lot of myths about placement in the least restrictive environment. And I think the first one we alluded to, but it's just worth simply saying, like LRE is not simply a matter of keeping students in local schools. There are probably some advocacy groups in the state that would look at it that way. And that's because we ultimately we have a bad tendency to prefer quantitative data or qualitative data when that should be used in conjunction.

00;13;13;05 - 00;13;36;17

John

And if you frankly, just look at numbers, you could you would make the argument if you're just purely looking at placement data, you would say that you you would argue the perhaps jersey doesn't have its students in the least restrictive environment, but ultimately that's a flawed analysis, in part because if new Jersey is the state that has the best options for students, people choose to move here and live here and utilize those options.

00;13;36;22 - 00;13;59;27

John

So compare it by comparing us to a underresourced U.S state that maybe has more students in traditional public schools, that doesn't necessarily mean those students are getting the best possible education, I think. I think it's funny, like a good funny example. This is when you go on like Facebook or social media, you see like these, we all love these are like these maps and it's like what's everyone's favorite fast food restaurant or something by state.

00;13;59;32 - 00;14;22;48

John

But it's it's just ultimately not reliable data. It creates all kinds of skews. So just doing a state to state comparison, while it's compelling, it sounds good. It's not a good way to think about it because again, it's about what's best for the student. And then if you hear stories about schools, states that might score well on a metric like that, and then they ultimately get sued in federal court for not doing right by the students they serve.

00;14;22;57 - 00;14;43;07

John

So so just be skeptical of that kind of idea. Just looking at this quantitatively and similarly, a private school may be the LRE for the all the reasons we said it's an individualized placement and ultimately the opportunity to be able to participate in the things that we think about as being a student is what really matters. It's not just this idea.

00;14;43;07 - 00;15;03;59

John

It's, you know, the idea of being in a traditional school. Because if you're in a traditional school but not truly mainstreamed, that's not a benefit. Like the perceived benefit of being in a public school is the ability to be educated alongside, you know, neurotypical peers and participate in activities alongside them. But if that's not in fact happening, what?

00;15;04;13 - 00;15;23;50

John

Why should I get counted as a good point? Why are you putting a star on the chart for a least restrictive environment? And that's frankly the way we count data in the state that we look at it by physical placement. But our our students, our students, our children are far more than just the sum of the buildings that they happen to go into and be educated in.

00;15;23;54 - 00;15;43;54

John

And of course, IDEA itself does not require for students to be placed in the regular class. I mean, that's ultimately what we talk about, this idea of a FAPE, or a free and appropriate public education. It really is a determination of all the factors involved. And placements, again, must be individually determined. And that's that combination of child study team part of, the parents

00;15;43;54 - 00;16;06;00

John

are part of that, specialist are part of that. The student at the appropriate age also are a part of it. It's really about what's best for that student. And then of course the state's benchmarks are not federal requirements. So just because our state chooses to measure something a particular way or chooses to scores for schools in a particular way, that's not the law.

00;16;06;05 - 00;16;28;19

John

It doesn't mean that that data is isn't valuable. But don't, it becomes an apples and oranges thing. I think it's very important to recognize that least restrictive environment is a federal law concept is not synonymous with location, where our students being placed, no matter how many times people might spin it to you, and no matter if you were to sit in a room with a fancy PowerPoint presentation, I could put up bar charts tot.

00;16;28;19 - 00;16;48;46

John

But it doesn't necessarily mean that what we're talking about is accurate and. And it's also important too, that the county, the county office provides information but they do not approve placements. So they're just not, they're not a part of that process.

00;16;48;51 - 00;17;13;46

John

And then obviously separate is separate too. So despite the fact that our funding streams somewhat prioritize alternative public placement versus, say, a private placement, it's not inherently it's not inherently more mainstream to be at a county special service district than it would be to be in an AP SSD. And again, it should really be about the quality of what the student is experiencing.

00;17;13;46 - 00;17;33;04

John

And that's why if we had our way, we think about least restrictive experience as opposed to environment. And then that's and I think this document puts it really bluntly, and it's well done. a classroom in a trailer does not make a child feel included. Like, I mean, we couldn't say that any any more plainly than merely being a public school.

00;17;33;09 - 00;17;54;23

John

If your entire day is about around of individuals like yourself anyway, but in an under-resourced setting, you're not necessarily gaining the benefit of being educated or participating with neurotypical peers or otherwise you know, not special needs individuals. And of course, paraprofessional support needs to be carefully considered.

00;17;54;23 - 00;17;56;13

John

and this is, this goes this cuts both ways.

00;17;56;13 - 00;18;19;09

John

But remembering those values and one on, one on ones. Right. And sometimes a student being sent to any of these of district placements may be sent with or without their own one on one, or perhaps a nurse or whatever the need is. Similarly, you could be in your traditional public school with one, but that alone isn't a fix because it doesn't necessarily get you the resources or the involvement that you deserve.

00;18;19;13 - 00;18;48;05

John

And now it could be again, it's all about the needs of the child. And but if what is their actual day to day experience? And of course, I think this has been it's great that these numbers lead up to this. placement is not an outcome. Like at the end of the day, the state can measure whatever it wants, but at the end of the day, you're concerned about your child and we're ultimately should be concerned about a student having the most fulfilling life possible that they can, that they can live their life up to their abilities.

00;18;48;09 - 00;19;08;26

John

And if that's, you know, you know, that ability to, you know, go to college or enter competitive employment or supportive employment, you know, whether that's to live on their own or live in a group home, whatever the best possible outcome for them is, and then their own happiness, of course, the ability of that to have a hobby, engaging relationships with other human beings, that's what really matters.

00;19;08;31 - 00;19;33;44

John

And when we look back on our own education, our own education, we're not really thinking so much about what that you know, the particulars of what classroom we were in or what we were being taught or thinking about what we're able to do because of that education. So that's I think, and that doesn't pre-judge the placement. The goal is, is really focusing on what you, in your heart of hearts believe is going to be the best outcome for your child and then pursue it, you know, as zealously and appropriate as possible.

00;19;33;48 - 00;20;10;28

John

And then this is more of a public policy point. But it bears being said, private special education is not fact more costly than public options. So while I quoted those tuition rates earlier and it did sound a little high, oftentimes they are. This is an actual cost system that includes every cost. So that includes so unlike a public option where the pension is being covered by the state

and the buildings being subsidized by the county and the state Schools Development Authority, that tuition dollars, it's almost every, let's say, 98% of the cost of actually educating that child.

00;20;10;28 - 00;20;35;43

John

That includes the salaries of the staff that are, in fact, lower than the salaries that their public counterparts are getting paid, it includes their salaries, includes their pensions, their health care and includes facilities improvements. So when you hear that big number, it's big because it's an honest, accurate assessment. If you were quoted the tuition rate and again, you're not paying any of these as a parent but it's worth understanding from the public policy perspective

00;20;35;43 - 00;20;51;18

John

So again, there's a little bit of the difference between what the law is and what actuality is. But students that are properly classified should begin transition planning around the time or, you know, approaching 14 or sometimes the pre transition planning that happens before that.

00;20;52;08 - 00;21;15;47

John

And then depending on the type of school, depending on the type of placement and that's the student population you're serving that you some some of them are looking at the whole spectrum of outcome options. Right. Depending on what type of need and disability is being addressed there. And some of them, [...] have, partnerships with community businesses, they have in-house training opportunities.

00;21;15;52 - 00;21;33;16

John

A lot of a lot of the schools really innovated during the pandemic as well, because they had to, I mean, AP SSDs were ultimately the first schools in the state to reopen because the populations they serve needed it. So they were back that September, if not sooner. Whereas a lot, as we know, our traditional public school districts ultimately were closed a lot longer.

00;21;33;21 - 00;21;53;40

John

Having said that, you couldn't necessarily bring students out in the community the way they used to, so they found ways to actually bring in real work that whether it was working, maybe working with a manufacturer, having a manufacturing process brought in or a quality check process, you know, because and because these, these things are ultimately important, you know, making sure something meets a quality check.

00;21;53;40 - 00;22;06;45

John

And again, depending on the ability of the student in question, sometimes it could be a task like verifying that a bottle cap operates correctly for a prescription medication. Because if we're going to mail some lifesaving medication that cap better stay on

00;22;06;45 - 00;22;12;07

John

and then just double checking all of those or putting in those seals that we know that, that, that, that silver piece of paper.

00;22;12;10 - 00;22;14;46

John

like doing that again and again with a tool.

00;22;14;46 - 00;22;41;56

John

But that was that was real work that gets done for a living in all sorts of places, because you can have a machine do the motion you want but someone is much better quality checking things that actually impact people's lives. And so, as you can imagine, now that the that the lockdown phase, the pandemic has subsided, life has returned to normal in a lot of ways, but really reopening all those arrangements to get students out into, you know, community based instruction opportunities.

00;22;42;01 - 00;23;02;24

John

And I think it's important to recognize that. I think when we think about education, the first thing we think about, rightfully so, it's educational outcomes. And we think of our professional outcomes. Well, there is a piece of this that's also about, you know, life skills and how to live, live our lives as independently as possible. And a lot of out district placements, particularly the SSDs, focus on those sorts of things.

00;23;02;24 - 00;23;29;59

John

So, I mean, you do see schools that have, miniature apartments that can actually teach the ability to, to make beds, to learn how to cook different meals, things that might actually be a real skill. I mean, it was interesting. On tour I went a lot of schools have horticulture programs. And one thing that really struck me when I was very early in this role is, you know, this could be a job opportunity and they hire people to do this, but if it's not, maybe it's something that they just do because they like it.

00;23;30;04 - 00;23;52;31

John

And then how else you can and what's, what's more of an experience than that. Again, the chance to actually try different things and figure out what you want for your own life. so that's and that's where I think that's the other thing to recognize. Some of these schools have small

they're all smaller than traditional public school counterparts, in part because you need to be specialized and individualized.

00;23;52;36 - 00;24;10;57

John

And some of them, some of the schools have as few as 16 students, some might go up to several hundred. But again, it's about the needs of the students they're serving, you know, and the limitations that, you know, the limitations and the opportunities the students bring to the table, but also, those, so far as you know, the abilities of our specialists to meet those needs.

00;24;11;48 - 00;24;17;21

John

Yeah. So thank you very much for having.