

**Re: Parent Letter for A-
March 5, 2025**

Dear IEP team,

A- remains an incredibly, incredibly joyful and creative autistic boy. As a 5 year old, he has seen massive growth and development.

This year, due to existing DOE policies as well as last minute decisions made by the DOE in the summer of 2025 leading to confusion and delays, we have switched to working privately with his Speech Therapist who has been working with A- since he was 2 years old, and have found a private OT. We also only received a SETSS in January 2025.

As parents deeply involved in his education, along with his SLP, OT, and his new SETSS, we have a clear understanding of the most suitable learning environment for him.

Inclusion:

A-, like all children including those with complex disabilities, would benefit the most from being in a class setting that is representative of his community - with non-disabled and disabled peers together. A class setting that sees him as truly belonging, and one that exists to teach the kids in its class, rather than finding the kids that can adapt to it. This is borne out by extensive research over multiple decades (available on request) that show that across all goals - academics, social-emotional, happiness, and long-term employment and integration - true integration is the best for all children.

In addition to this, we strongly believe it is simply his right as a person to get to be with all the other kids from his neighborhood regardless of race, gender, or disability. Unfortunately this is not possible in NYC, so we have had to find alternative education paths that work for him.

Adapting curriculum to his communication style:

Since A- is a different communicator, A- flourishes when the curriculum is adapted to meet his communication needs, and his interests.

In the past 6 months, it's clear that his receptive communication has skyrocketed, but it's still critical to provide information in multiple formats and to ensure he has access to communicate in multiple formats.

For example, on his counting goal, one time we were explaining that his Dad is 54 years old, and a few minutes later A- went to his tablet, pulled up the game Endless Numbers, and went immediately to the number 54.

Another example of the goal of his ability to express his emotions was when he got very sad when Dad left, and he went to Spotify, opened a playlist with songs with the word "Sunshine" navigated to the song "Ain't no sunshine when she's gone", opened the lyrics in Spotify, and scrolled to the very last lyric "Anytime she goes away".

Lastly, through customizing his speech-generated AAC device, we ensure we can model and give him the opportunity to discuss what is important to him. Now that he has shown interest in written words, we have created pages with written phrases, including pages with all the vocabulary needed to discuss bus stops such as his favorite bus routes, street names, etc.

An example of how we have adapted curriculum to his communication style is when his grandfather was terminally ill and dying. To explain to him the concept of alive vs non-alive, and then dying, we did extensive research on how to communicate these concepts to children through Sesame Street, picture books, and easy-reading books for Intellectually Disabled adults. Once we understood how to explain these concepts, we created multiple Pictello's (clickable customized audio books) that used songs, as well as familiar objects and people to him like buses and his cat, to teach him these concepts. We printed these Pictello books out, sang him the songs, as well as periodically talked to him about what was happening as his grandfather grew sicker and then died. Through this, we believe he was able to process what was happening, as well as his own feelings and those around him.

Self-directed learning:

A- has shown that he learns and grows in a self-directed manner. Through self-directed learning he has grown in leaps and bounds including his pre-literacy, and problem-solving goals.

With pre-literacy, after years of scaffolding, this year he has shown clear sight-word recognition and letter recognition. For example, he will point to multiple words in books that are meaningful to him like "long", "blue", "bus". We now have print-outs of phrases, book pages, and more all over our house and he will read words like "shine", "sunshine", etc. Due to his love of buses, he will read street signs all over the city, including on bus stops, pointing to words he loves like "New York".

He is now using written words to prompt his own speech like a sign that says "A- can jump" on the wall, which he will look at and say the words before jumping.

Given his love of electric toy trains, we bought train alphabets, and make words for the train to pull around. He is more able to focus on these words since they are moving,, and he will frequently say those words when they are recognizable to him.

Learning in community:

A- learns through prolonged observation, particularly from his community of both disabled and non-disabled peers.

A-'s days are spent exploring NYC. Through this he learns navigation, literacy, numeracy, different cultures, and gains skills like street safety and boundaries of other people.

This year he has expanded his interest in NYC walking from Union Square to Central Park, or the upper part of the High Line, as well as from one side of Manhattan to the other, exploring new parks and playgrounds, new stores, and new streets.

He's also had many opportunities to learn how to problem-solve, as there have been natural boundaries that have arisen within our family, and he's shown he's an adept problem-solver. As one parent had a foot injury this year, A- has understood that that parent can't run or slide, and he has taken that information in stride, offering alternatives to that parent to continue playing his game (such as "walk" or go down the playground in another way).

As A- gets older and academics get more complex, it will be even more critical for A-'s learning to have the support of a skilled SETSS who can work with a unique learner like A-, to ensure that he is meeting the curriculum of his same-age peers. A- also needs to continue to expand his use of a speech-generated AAC device so that he can be understood by less familiar people as he gets older and becomes more independent. We are requesting 10-15 hours / week of SETSS to ensure the curriculum can be adapted to his needs so he can meet his goals.

Thank you so much for your time, care, and attention wanting A- Balabaer to thrive in the most appropriate setting for him.

Shubha Balabaer and Daniel Baer, parents of A- Balabaer