

Despite the Degeneration of His Vision, We Guided a Student to Independence Over Fourteen Years

A Case Study in Long-Term Out-of-District Placement
for a Student with Multiple Disabilities, Including Visual
Impairment and Behavioral Needs



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The Initial Perspective and Overview

Most special education case studies describe an intervention to address a single behavioral challenge. This case study describes a six-year-old student who entered Harbor School with progressive visual impairment, learning delays, and social-emotional and behavioral needs. Our school worked with this student and his family over a fifteen-year period to help him reach the fullest outcome he was capable of.

Over his time here, he lost the sight in one eye and most of the sight in the other. With our expert support team, he learned to read a room he could not see. He learned to find his way within his school environment — and eventually across a town utilizing community transportation services — without a hand to hold.

The outcome, after fifteen years of support, is a young man working in his community, confident traveling on his own, and equipped with the basic financial literacy skills to support his life goals over time.

The purpose of this paper is to examine what made this student's success possible, and what it suggests about how districts should think about placement decisions for students whose needs do not fit inside a single category.

A multi-disability profile presents an extremely challenging placement — one that requires a school like Harbor School here in Eatontown New Jersey to meet that challenge over time.

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The Referral: A Profile That Is More Than a Single Diagnosis

When this student was referred to Harbor School at age six, his visual impairment was the most visible feature of his profile. And it did not stay static — it progressed throughout his school years, until he could perceive only shapes, shadows, and extra-large print in his stronger eye. It was not, however, the only reason for the out-of-district placement.

His academic delays stemmed only partly from his vision. He also had an **auditory processing disorder**: although his hearing itself was intact processing multiple concepts at once, holding information in sequence, and following extended explanations of events all posed significant challenges. His speech was affected as well, with **intelligibility reduced by articulation errors including distortions, substitutions, and omissions of sounds.**

Our student also presented with **social-emotional needs**, which manifested in behaviors that required attention and guidance.

That his academic delays were not reducible to his vision is the central diagnostic insight of the case, and it is the one most often missed at the point of referral.

Multiple disabilities do not add. They multiply.

A student who cannot see the whiteboard and cannot easily process what is read aloud from it does not face two obstacles; he faces a compounding one. The placement decision recognized that no single specialist — a teacher of the visually impaired, a learning consultant, a behaviorist — could resolve a profile in which each need reshaped the others.

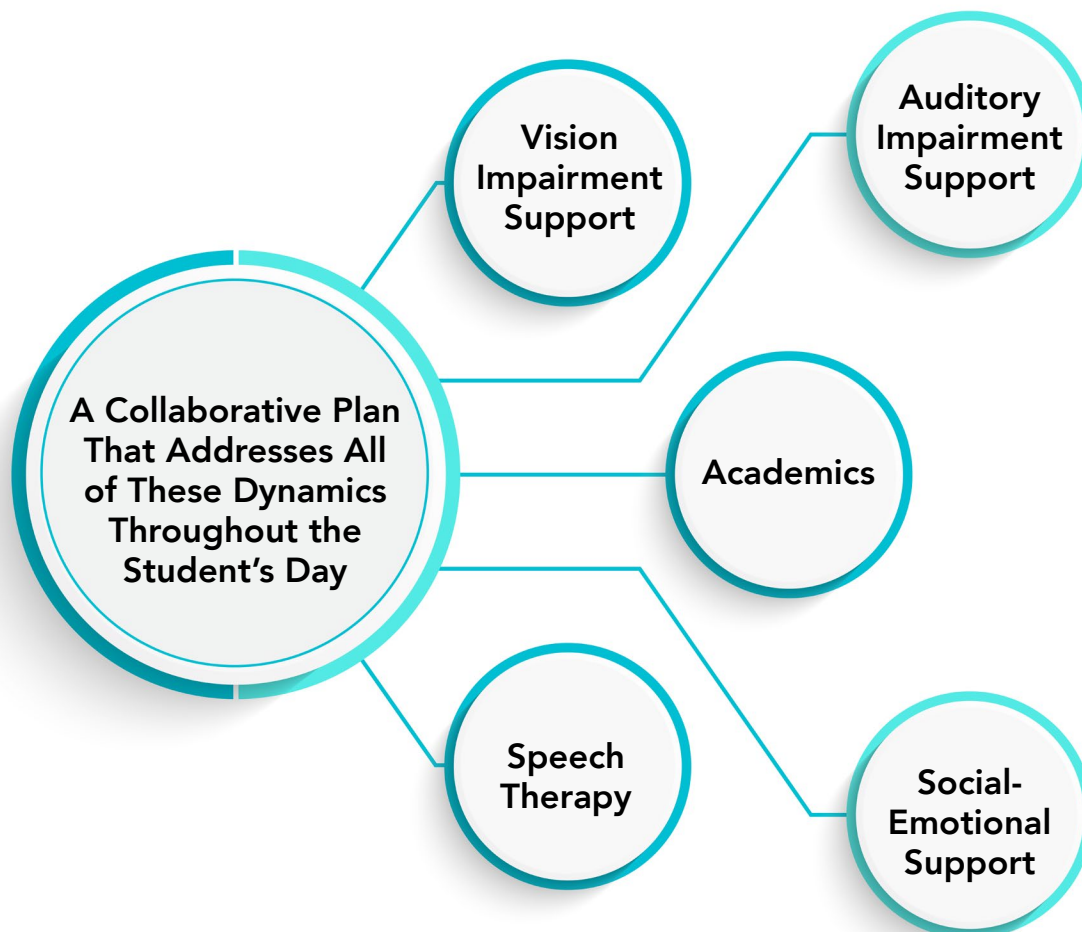
Had the team treated his profile as a vision problem with secondary effects, the intervention would have been enlargement, magnification, and Braille instruction — and it would have addressed perhaps half of what stood between him and progress.

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Building Access: Support Services Designed Around a Changing Profile

Over fourteen years, the student received support services overseen by our dedicated and highly experienced occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech therapists, and counselors. Such a roster of services is not unusual in itself. What distinguished the programming was that it continually rebuilt his social and life skills as his vision declined. A student who can read enlarged print at nine and cannot at fourteen has not simply lost an accommodation — he has lost a method of learning, and the team has to replace it before the loss becomes an academic delay. ***This was a dynamic and fluid approach that was implemented throughout this student's years here at Harbor School.***



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The Most Consequential Support, However, Came From Outside The School.

Harbor School coordinated with the [Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired](#), whose specialists worked with the student both in his home and at school. The school-based component mattered enormously. Rather than being escorted through the building by staff, he was taught to navigate it — to travel the school community independently, using orientation and mobility techniques rather than adult supervision. Independence was not a goal deferred to transition planning. It was instruction, beginning at six and continuing until he left Harbor School at the age of twenty.

A child with a progressive vision loss is, among other things, a child receiving a steady stream of bad news about his own body. What he cannot get from a therapy session — what no goal on an IEP can deliver — is the sight of an adult who lives the life he is afraid he will not get to live: employed, mobile, autonomous, moving through the world on his own terms. That exposure did not

The Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired also brought blind adults into the school, including individuals who traveled with guide dogs. This is the intervention that staff return to when asked what changed for this student.

Belonging: The Social Work of a Student Who Cannot See Faces

The student's most persistent difficulties were social-emotional. He worked hard at sustaining friendships and at reading social cues.

The connection between this and his vision deserves to be stated plainly, because it is often overlooked. The overwhelming majority of social information is visual — expression, posture, gaze, the half-second glance that signals a joke has gone too far. Typically sighted peers absorb this vocabulary passively, thousands of times a day, from infancy. A student with severe visual impairment does not. What his classmates acquired by osmosis, he had to be taught explicitly, and he had to apply it in real time without the feedback loop that makes correction possible.

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He was not a withdrawn child. He had formed relationships at his prior placement, and he formed them at Harbor School as well. What proved decisive was structure. Over several years, through his participation in bocce through Special Olympics New Jersey, he found a setting where the social rules were explicit, participation was the point, and connection did not depend on catching cues he could not see. Structured, shared-purpose activity gave him a reliable route into peer relationships — and the friendships formed there were real. Here another building block was forming for his success upon returning to his home district.

The Family as Partner – and What the Family Gained

Progress in this case tracked closely with the consistency between school and home, and the family's engagement was a constant across fourteen years.

The partnership ran in both directions. His teacher helped the family secure services through the Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD) and pursued the possibility of obtaining a guide dog — an option the family ultimately determined was not the right fit for their son.

That last detail is worth dwelling on, because it illustrates something districts frequently underestimate. The value delivered was not the guide dog. The value was that the family reached the point of making an informed decision about one. Knowing which agencies exist, when eligibility windows open, how applications are evaluated, and what daily life with a service animal actually demands — this is specialized, hard-won knowledge, and it is not evenly distributed. Families do not fail to access these systems because they lack motivation. They fail because the systems are opaque.

A long-term specialized placement supplies awareness of those systems, and support in navigating them, not only to the student but also to the family. Over fourteen years, the expertise of Harbor School compounds in a way that no annual IEP meeting can replicate.

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From Classroom to Employment Training and Support

As the student aged, he entered our Work-Based Learning program, where instruction shifted decisively toward the concrete requirements of adult life:

- **Employment readiness** — interviewing skills and completing job applications
- **Resume development** — including, given his vision, learning to memorize and deliver his own credentials aloud, converting a document he could not read into knowledge he carried with him
- **Financial literacy** — checking and savings accounts, banking procedures, and basic investments, stocks, and bonds, which he took an interest in as these concepts were discussed and lessons were structured in an oral format
- **Systems navigation** — direct instruction in the services available through the Division of Developmental Disabilities, reinforced by attendance at DDD seminars
- **Community Based Instruction** — skills practiced in actual community settings, where the noise, unpredictability, and navigational demands cannot be simulated in a classroom

Transition and Outcome

At age twenty, the student transitioned back into his home district's Work-Based Learning program — a return that fourteen years of preparation had built toward.

The timing reflected deliberate planning rather than an arbitrary date. New Jersey students who will need adult services through the Division of Developmental Disabilities are encouraged to use their full educational entitlement and remain enrolled through the school year in which they turn twenty-one, since most DDD services do not begin before then.

He is employed in his local community today, continuing to build his employable skills. He meets his own transportation needs using local public transit.

The six-year-old who arrived at Harbor School required an adult beside him to cross a hallway. The twenty-year-old who left it crosses his town alone, to a job that is his.

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Implications for Placement Decisions

- **Assess for interaction, not inventory.** This student's needs were not a list to be addressed in parallel. His vision shaped his learning, his learning shaped his social access, and his social access shaped his behavior. Programming had to treat the profile as a system.
- **Sensory loss is social loss.** Visual impairment is routinely programmed as an academic access issue. For this student, its heaviest cost fell on peer relationships. Social-emotional instruction should be explicit and central, not incidental.
- **Independence is taught early, or taught later at far greater cost.** Orientation and mobility instruction inside the school building, beginning in childhood, is what made independent community travel routine by twenty. It can be introduced at eighteen, but the ground it has to cover is much steeper.
- **Representation functions as intervention.** Contact with successful blind adults changed what this student believed was available to him. That belief preceded every skill that followed.
- **Expertise extends to the family.** A significant share of the value delivered was navigational — connecting the family to DDD and to informed decisions about resources they would not otherwise have reached.
- **Continuity compounds.** Fourteen years in one program, with a team that knew the student's history through a progressive vision loss, produced a coherence that no sequence of short-term placements could match.

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In His Own Words: A Testimony from This Student Years Later

"I came from New York, and I started in Harbor School. I started when I was 6 years old and I am now 20 years old. Harbor helped me when public school could not. I moved to New Jersey because they understand a lot of behaviors and I was legally blind. They helped me over the years to master my abilities to express myself in different ways, to express my emotions in better, healthier ways. Harbor gave me opportunities to perform on stage and you know help me with academics such as math. They helped me grow into a better person and use skills to manage my emotions. I have to give credit to many teachers there, including former and past staff who taught me over the years I have been a student at Harbor School. They have helped me with academics, especially my love for social studies and with job and work skills. The adaptive physical education teacher helped me master a lot of skills in the gym and gave me opportunities to participate in the Special Olympics. All the principals helped me too.

The school is very great for kids who want to learn and grow from a young age until adulthood. Harbor can help you a lot. I learned a lot at Harbor. Basically, Harbor is a very good school if you want to grow your skills on many different things".

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About RKS Associates

Since 1980, RKS Associates has been a leader in providing the needs of special education students here in New Jersey. Our focus has been to create schools that provide a safe and nurturing environment for children with a variety of disabilities.

RKS Associates prides itself on fostering a safe and welcoming environment for every student through our network of special education schools in New Jersey. We invite you to come and experience a wide variety of opportunities, including therapy services, nursing, counseling, psychiatric consultation and support on a variety of levels, BCBA support, ABA services, adaptive physical education, art, music, transition, community-based instruction, and job sampling. We also incorporate an extended year program with the full range of services which enables the students to experience continuity in their special needs.

Please visit any of our three schools listed below to see for yourself just how comprehensive our programs are for children with special needs across a range of learning, social, language and behavioral challenges. Our goals are to help each and every student reach their fullest potential.



www.alphaschool.com



www.thegatewayschool.com



www.harborschool.com

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