



Court Appointed Special Advocates of Somerset, Hunterdon, and Warren Counties, Inc.

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CASA OF SOMERSET, HUNTERDON
AND WARREN COUNTIES

August 9, 2016

Thomas Dilts, Esq.
Children's Hope Initiative
P.O. Box 8063
Bridgewater, NJ 08807

Dear Judge Dilts,

As per your request, here is our report of the nine children served by Traveling Tutors during the months of June-August, 2016:

Patty Hernandez (4 children officially and 1 unofficially)

Ms. Hernandez is working with "Joseph and John," two brothers. She has no relationship with the foster parent as she does not respond to Ms. Hernandez's text messages or phone calls. She speaks directly to the boys and their teachers.

John just completed the 4th grade. Ms. Hernandez reports that he is an incredibly bright boy who is mathematically gifted and a fluent reader with great comprehension. He has struggled with social studies, so Ms. Hernandez provided supplementary materials that they would work on after completing his homework assignments. She found that as an immigrant to this country, John lacked life experiences and exposure to American culture that may have hurt him with his overall studies, especially on standardized tests that often make assumptions about common culture. She has found John to be a very respectful, hard-working student. She feels he needs a mentor more than a tutor.

Joseph just completed 5th grade and was placed in a self-contained, special-ed classroom). Joseph could complete assignments but needed some assistance. He was cooperative, quiet and worked hard while I was with him but often forgot his homework at school or did not remember if he had any. Ms. Hernandez brought supplementary age-level reading assignments to work on together. Joseph struggles with comprehension and vocabulary at the 5th grade level reading, and again a lack of common culture references is part of the reason he struggles academically. Like his brother, he lacks a basic knowledge of US history and American culture.

Ms. Hernandez reports that Joseph also could benefit from a mentor. He needs ongoing assistance to stay on task and needs someone who looks at his work on a daily basis. Judging from her experience, this is not happening as his folder is packed with work and papers that are not reviewed by an adult. With no communication from the resource parent, summer tutoring was not a viable option.

Ms. Hernandez's June report states that she is concerned that "Ariel" (a 3rd grader) is not progressing as she would like. She has expressed her concerns to both the DCPD worker and to her foster mother. Her reading

skills are significantly below grade level. She has great oral comprehension, but reading is still a struggle. Ariel was assessed by the school for a reading disability in April, and the school found that her reading skills have not improved since her last evaluation and in some areas have gotten worse.

Ms. Hernandez attended Ariel's IEP in June, and the evaluator conveyed that Ariel is not making a lot of progress and reading is a frustration for her. Her comprehension is great. She lacks the ability to decode words and gets overwhelmed and shuts down. On the WIST (word identifying spelling test) they performed, Ariel was on grade level for only one part of the test.

Her foster mother has expressed concern that Ariel may have ADHD as she sometimes loses focus. It is Ms. Hernandez's position that Ariel suffers from some type of reading disability or some type of dyslexia, which results in Ariel believing that at times she is dumb because the work is just too hard for her.

It was determined at the IEP meeting that there was enough concern over Ariel to warrant a full evaluation, in part to determine if she is a candidate for special education. At last report the 3-day evaluation was being scheduled. With camp, vacations, etc., the foster mom has opted out of tutoring for the summer.

She is also working unofficially with Ariel's sister Annelise, who is entering kindergarten in September. She has noted some concerns about her abilities in the initial assessments, but she is not at such a deficit that she is outside of the skills of a normal kindergartener.

"Linda" is an 8th grade student with non-specific IEP, identified as slow learner with reading delays in 2nd grade. Ms. Hernandez has been working with her on math, reading comprehension, science and social studies with a focus on preparing her for High School in the fall. Linda is quiet and lacks confidence in her abilities. She had little or no homework on a regular basis- she was in a special ed program and homework she was given was easily mastered by her.

Ms. Hernandez brought age-level reading passages (started with 7th grade and ended with high school level) Linda had little difficulty with content but was weaker on vocabulary as they progressed. Linda shared that she hates to read aloud as she becomes really self-conscious and fears making a mistake. Ms. Hernandez has assured her weekly that she was definitely capable of completing work at her grade level. She will be participating in color guard camp over the summer, which Ms. Hernandez thinks will bolster her confidence. Lexi was not given any summer pre-work for high school, so there is no tutoring over the summer.

Susan Diana (1 child)

Ms. Diana continues to work with Lisa, specifically in the Rewards Reading Program, which focused on the two sounds from the vowel combination oo (book, moon). They also reviewed previous vowel combinations, and Ms. Diana has been introducing common prefixes and suffixes to help R. decode multisyllabic words.

She reports that Lisa's challenge is blending sounds. Although her phonemic awareness is solid (i.e. she knows the sounds that consonants and vowel combinations make), she often blends the sounds incorrectly. Ms. Diana is focusing on getting her to stretch out each word per the sounds she identifies. Once she stretches the words slowly, according to each sound, she will figure out the word. For now, the focus is on helping her practice segmenting the individual sounds in words.

Ms. Diana reports that Lisa will be attending summer school, and she is hopeful that a summer of relaxed reading will give her the practice she needs and give her the opportunity to utilize the reading strategies which she has learned over the past year. Ms. Diana will not be working with Lisa over the summer months but will resume tutoring in September.

Andrew Kozlowski: (1 child)

Mr. Kozlowski is working with one child, "George," who is autistic. George often has difficulty focusing on tasks, so Mr. Kozlowski has been creative in finding ways to engage him. One strategy that has worked is selling candy. Mr. Kozlowski brings candy and gives George coins, helping him to do addition, subtraction, multiplication, and sorting with the incentive of purchasing candy. When he gets bored with this, he has used dice. He is also using color picture worksheets to help illustrate these math concepts, which has worked well.

They also play "21" with the numbered cards from a UNO deck. George can really add single digits quickly, like he has memorized them. Then he slows down and goes back to counting in his head but is still very accurate. The winner gets one Skittle per hand. Mr. Kozlowski reports that a friend suggested he try to teach George to use an abacus. He believes that since George is a very visual learner, this may help him grasp the math concepts more easily.

George is getting very good with counting money. He does not confuse quarters and nickels anymore and is starting to memorize simple addition. He is visibly pleased when Mr. Kozlowski praises his progress and has used incentives like giving George a piece of black birch bark to smell, teaching him to juggle, and bringing him a "twister in a bottle" when he focus on and completes assigned tasks. George is obsessed with the weather too, so things like He offered to tutor him twice a week over the summer, but the foster mom said once is enough over the summer. George's foster mom is very engaged with his educational work, which has been a great help to Mr. Kozlowski.

Susan Sutch (1 child)

Ms. Sutch has not been working with "Beatrice," who is 17, since the end of school. She does not believe that her tutoring efforts were a success in that Beatrice has not been very responsive or proactive in making and keeping appointments. When she's there, everything goes well but getting her to the appointments has been challenging. Ms. Sutch thinks that a younger child might be a better fit for her as she does not have the flexibility in her schedule to accommodate missed appointments. She will reach out to the advocate to see if Beatrice is interested in doing this on a regular basis once school starts or if another tutor might be a better fit.

Rhonda Simoff (1 child)

Ms. Simoff was assigned one child late in the school year. "Dylan" is 12-years-old and has global developmental delays and there are concerns that he has ADHD. He routinely fails each marking period and is significantly behind in school. Since Ms. Simoff is very new to this case, she has been assessing his status. The child's caregiver believes that medication might help him to focus. However, others involved in the case, including the biological parents and the CASA, don't think that is necessarily the best course of action. Ms. Simoff is compiling a short report of her observations and concerns and will provide them to the CASA on the case for inclusion in her court report with recommendations on how best to help him. In the meantime, Ms. Simoff is working with Dylan twice a week and trying to get him focused on a regular routine of study.

Carol Dvoor (1 child officially, 1 child unofficially)

Ms. Dvoor has been working with Anita. While CASA was discharged from the case a few months ago, the family has welcomed Ms. Dvoor's ongoing support for Anita's educational needs. The mother, Anita, and Anita's younger sister "Sarah," have all come to view her as a positive and supportive presence in the home, to the point where the mother calls her to schedule tutoring sessions, not the other way around.

Ms. Dvoor had an innovative project for Anita to work on over the summer, one that was fun and educational at the same time. It is an "All About Me" project. She was also able to engage Anita's mom in the project with a focus on Anita's early years. This project has a multi-discipline focus, incorporating reading (researching her heritage), organizing and summarizing, Social Studies (where she has lived), Science (cooking favorite dishes),

Math (measuring and timeline of events), and vocabulary. This is a project in which both Anita and her mother have been engaged throughout the summer, with Anita drawing some beautiful art to go into the project. Ms. Dvoor has begun preliminary assessments of Anita's younger sister, Sarah. Sarah asked on a recent visit what she and Anita were doing and Ms. Dvoor had her join them in looking through magazines, pointing to various pictures to see if she knew what they were, and state colors and numbers. Sarah was able to count to four but did not know her colors. She saw a picture of a star and sang. 'Twinkle. Twinkle Little Star.'

Ms. Dvoor has increased her visits to twice a week throughout the summer. I have enclosed Ariel's report card that shows just how well she is doing. She is flourishing!

Challenges: With it being summer, many of the tutors and many of the families have expressed a preference to not participate in tutoring over the summer. We hope that everyone will become more engaged as school begins again in the fall.

Achievements: The identification and remediation of learning disabilities sooner rather than later is an important achievement. We've also been very proud of the innovative strategies that tutors like Ms. Dvoor and Mr. Kozlowski are using to engage their students and bolster their confidence. Giving children the ability to feel like they CAN succeed is crucial to their academic success and progress.

We held a meeting with most, though not all, of the tutors in July to assess how things were going, what strategies were working, and what challenges they continue to have. Here is a synopsis of what we learned from that meeting:

Best Practice Takeaways:

- Make sure your teaching strategies are working for the child you are tutoring. If they aren't working, try something else until you hit on what engages them. Every child has his/her own way that they learn best.
- One recommendation was to work, then play, then work, then play. It helps to overcome learning fatigue and keep the child engaged.
- Find what interests your child and leverage that to teach. Example: Andy's child loves candy, so he used Skittles to solve equations. Carol is using an "All About Me" project based on the child: ethnic heritage (geography), favorite recipes (math), interests (science), etc. What do they love?
- Tutors who are meeting with the children twice a week are having better outcomes. If you can swing it, feel free to do it.
- Figure out your child's predominant learning style (auditory, tactile, visual) and build on it.
- Make sure to get baseline data (report cards, school testing, etc.) as well as copies of report cards moving forward so we can see if what we are doing is working, both for us and the funder.
- Talk with the school, the CASA, the resource parent, etc. so everyone is on the same page about academics – kids need cohesive messaging. Everybody on the same page!
- Make sure boundaries remain clear. If you see any unidentified or unmet needs, go through the primary CASA advocate to address. We aren't the advocates on these cases, so anything outside of tutoring needs to go through them.
- If you want to attend IEP meetings, make sure you check with the CASA first. It's their case.

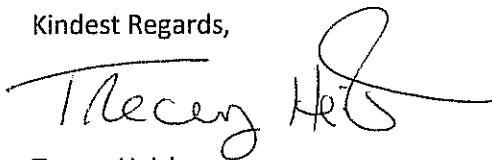
- Some of our kids have sensory issues that make sustained attention difficult. One of the tutors did some tai chi with his students to help quiet their minds. They thought it was cool without realizing that it was helping them to learn too.

Ongoing Challenges:

- Some of the tutors are having scheduling problems – the adults are not always where they are supposed to be. Suggestion: Try to follow up with a call or text early in the day to confirm so you don't waste your time.
- Children's engagement – all of these kids are struggling in school, and some of them subsequently believe that they can't do it. We have to figure out how to meet them where they are and build on what they know. They have to start to feel competent to make real progress.
- Lack of family support, particularly with biological parents. It makes sense that many bio parents likely did not have positive academic experiences themselves or have too many fundamental concerns for education to be a priority. Suggestions:
 - Teach parents how to help their child succeed
 - Making sure homework gets done
 - Encourage attending school conferences/communication with teachers
 - Encourage parents to read with their children or have the children read to them if literacy is an issue
 - Encourage them to ask questions if there are things they don't understand
 - Have a positive attitude about education
 - Help parents be personally accountable so they can successfully step in when tutoring ends. Too many have a "not my problem" attitude about the child's education.
- School complacency. Many of the schools have written the kids off and are just moving them along without any real effort to help them learn. We have to do what we can to help build their fundamental skills and encourage their CASA's to get them needed services.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide these services. They are invaluable to the children receiving them.

Kindest Regards,



Tracey Heisler
Executive Director

