

A Helping Hand

FACT Oregon helps parents of children with disabilities learn how to speak up

written by James Sinks

SOMETHING WAS HAPPENING with Ruby. A child experiencing Down's syndrome, she had seemed to be faring reasonably well in her early years in school. She was in a special education classroom and enjoyed coloring, listening to music, singing and dancing.

But in third grade, Ruby started showing signs of distress, through behavioral changes. And the district didn't have answers.

That's when her mom, Maria Rangel, learned about FACT Oregon, a statewide nonprofit based in Portland that helps families of children experiencing disabilities to better advocate for their education needs.

That help turned Maria from a passive parent into a successful advocate, and her request for better bilingual communication tools made a difference, she said. "I got that strength from my newfound knowledge about what was best for my daughter and realizing that if I did not speak up, no one else would," she said.

Ruby is now doing well in high school, and Maria is now a bilingual program specialist at FACT Oregon.

FACT, which stands for "Family and Community Together," is officially designated as the Oregon-based "Parent Training & Information Center" by both the state and federal government,

Illustration: Allison Bye

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— Marc Siegel, Oregon Department of Education spokesman

and the nonprofit receives part of its funding from government grants. Services include road maps for how to interface with public schools, parent classes, referrals, a hotline, and dispute resolution support, said Cori Mielke, FACT's director of outreach and training.

Parent Training & Information Centers are responsible for providing free support to families of children experiencing disabilities, said Marc Siegel, a spokesman for the Oregon Department of Education. FACT Oregon helps parents to understand their rights and responsibilities under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which guarantees a free and appropriate public education to all children with disabilities, he said.

In some states, the relationship can be adversarial between disability-rights advocates and education agencies, but that's not the case in Oregon, Siegel said.

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Of the 553,012 students in Oregon public schools, some 78,714 experience a disability and are eligible for special education, according to the state. Another 6,845 preschool-age children are served via early childhood special education programs, and eligible for FACT Oregon help.

In any given year, the Oregon nonprofit interfaces with roughly 10,000 families, Mielke said. Families frequently come to FACT in times of crisis, such as when a student with a disability is facing suspension or expulsion, she said.

Parents who call are able to get one-to-one help from other people who understand what it's like, she said. Every member of the thirteen-person staff has a family member with a disability.

As part of the effort to better equip parents to be advocates, FACT recently created a toolkit—with help from the state and school officials—that demystifies the sometimes intimidating terminology and rules for school programming, such as the process for creating personalized, student-specific individual education plans, or IEPs.

In addition to providing information and advocacy, the nonprofit also stages activities to improve the quality of life for children experiencing disabilities. In response to statistics that show those students are far less likely to participate in school sports, FACT Oregon stages a youth triathlon called "All Ability Tri4Youth."

The goal is for every child to have a success story. Nicole Rios-Seems of Phoenix in Southern Oregon thinks a happier chapter is more likely for her eighth-grade son, who has struggled to adjust since the pandemic. Thanks to the assistance from FACT Oregon, she believes she knows what to say, and how to say it.

"I am going to this meeting with my head held higher, better organized and ready to properly advocate for my son's education," she said. "I am so incredibly grateful." ■



An elementary school-aged child gets a hug from mom at a FACT Oregon event. FACT Oregon provides peer support and resources to families of children experiencing disabilities.