

EXHIBIT 4
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Why Megan is Learning Braille

by Marla Palmer

The IEP Team shall—in the case of a child who is blind or visually impaired, provide for instruction in Braille and the use of Braille unless the IEP Team determines, after an evaluation of the child’s reading and writing skills, needs, and appropriate reading and writing media (including an evaluation of the child’s future needs for instruction in Braille or the use of Braille), that instruction in Braille or the use of Braille is not appropriate for the child.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)
Public Law 105-17
Section 614(d)(3)(B)(iii)

A few days ago I peeked in on a Braille party that my daughter was attending. The students were putting on a puppet show that was entitled, “Why I am learning Braille.” I heard the innocent but profound answers, “I am learning Braille because I am blind.” Another response was, “... so I can read.” When the spotlight hit my daughter she said,

“I am learning Braille so I don’t have to learn it when I am big.” I couldn’t help but chuckle. I am sure there have been numerous times when Megan has overheard her blind adult mentors, including her mom’s cousin, exclaim how they wished they had learned Braille when they were younger!



Megan Palmer

When Megan was born and we received the news that she was “visually impaired,” “legally blind,” “partially sighted”—we weren’t sure what to

expect for her future. Doctors and educators were positive that she would have a “normal” life with few adaptations. I vividly remember when Megan’s eye doctor exclaimed, “Megan will be just fine, and she won’t need many services like Braille.”

With that in mind I couldn’t understand why my cousin, Kris Cox repeatedly called me to share her personal experiences with the National Federation of the Blind (NFB). She kept asking that annoying question, “So Marla, are you going to have Megan learn Braille?” I thought I was doing a good job at explaining why I didn’t feel it was necessary, but for some reason (which I now understand) Kris would politely disagree. Kris grew up as a child with low-vision and was not given the opportunity to learn Braille. She expressed how much easier it would have been to learn Braille then (instead of now, as an adult) and gave examples of how Braille can be an effective literacy tool.

Kris invited us to our first National Convention of the NFB held in Dallas, Texas. Frankly we weren’t sure why we were attending a convention for “the blind” when our child was “visually impaired,” “legally blind,” “partially sighted.” The convention and those we met there created some defining moments for us. My husband and I discovered that Megan has been blind all along (smile) and most importantly that it’s okay to be blind. Our daughter could become a successful, contributing member to society if she could get the proper training and tools. And one of those tools was Braille. At that time, Megan was only eighteen-months-old. It’s hard to believe that five years later she is six-years-old and approaching first grade. Here’s part of our story from that time to now:

Early Intervention

Some parents that have children with partial vision oftentimes don’t take advantage of the early intervention programs that are available to them. Megan has received services since she was an infant. It was a great networking tool with professionals in the field and with other parents. Because it was a zero-to-three program, there were written individual and family goals. From day one, we had pre-Braille goals written into our plans.

This was actually suggested by our Parent Infant Program advisor. She said it serves several purposes:

1. It's never too early to start pre-Braille skills.
2. When it came time to write your child's first IEP, there should be no question from the team that you, as parents, want your low-vision child to learn Braille. It had been documented from day one.

Preschool

Upon the transition from Early Intervention to Preschool we were given three educational options for Megan: enroll her in the Utah School for the Blind, choose the Davis County District Preschool, or select a private preschool of our choice. After careful consideration, we opted to mainstream Megan in the district preschool program. I would not consider Megan's first year of preschool a huge success when it came to Braille services. The preschool teacher had wonderful talents and skills, but was very uncomfortable with having a low-vision child in her class. She would often forget how to make simple adaptations and seemed overwhelmed when given advice. Megan received consultant services from a teacher of the visually impaired two times a month (it would have been once a month if we had chosen a private preschool). However, the consultant had to spend all of her time concentrating on the preschool teacher rather than working on the IEP goals with Megan.

The next year we searched high and low in our district and found a wonderful teacher who truly understood the power of inclusion, was comfortable with working with children that needed adaptations, and was willing to be an integral part of the IEP team. We had overcome a huge hurdle. Now, the consultant for the visually impaired could come in and work one-on-one with Megan to help her achieve her Braille goals.

I had high expectations of the consultant that was visiting my child a whopping two times a month. I quickly learned that in order for Megan to effectively have a head start in Braille, we had to have daily Braille activities at home. I became good friends with Megan's Braille consultant and we agreed to work together. The two concepts we concentrated on were having a good understanding of the Braille cell, and familiarity with the Braillewriter. After Megan was introduced to these concepts we were able to work on them approximately fifteen minutes per day at home.

We concentrated on using the Braillewriter to build finger strength, to type the

Braille letters she also knew how to write in print, and to pretend to write stories. (In other words, she “scribbled” pretend stories with the Braillewriter just as sighted children scribble stories with a pencil.) Megan is a visual learner and she liked to see the shape of the Braille letter as well as feel it. She memorized the Braille alphabet by sight and by touch. Megan had no problem wearing her “blinders” as she understood at a young age the importance of learning Braille tactually. I think it helped that everyone—her teacher of the visually impaired, her regular teacher, and her family—had a positive attitude about using the sleepshades (blindfolds).

We were able to find some wooden Braille tiles (about one-and-a-half inches wide, two-and-a-half inches high, and one-half inch thick) that had large Braille knobs on one side and large print on the other (Note: Mr. Arnold Dunn in Florida makes these and donates them to families or institutions). One afternoon we found a small box and Megan decorated it the way she wanted. We cut two holes in the side where her hands could fit in. After practicing learning several letters, we would mix the tiles up and put them in the box. Megan would slide her hands through the holes, feel for the different tiles, and tell me which letters they were. This is still a favorite game.

By the end of her third year in preschool Megan could read and type her name in Braille. She had memorized all the letters in Braille (tactually and visually) and could also tell which dot sequence formed which letter. During the summer before her kindergarten year, her preschool consultant for the visually impaired checked out a copy of *The Mangold Developmental Program of Tactile Perception and Braille Letter Recognition* (Exceptional Teaching Aids, California) for us to use at home with Megan. I feel Mangold was one of the best teaching tools available to us. The workbook was very easy for a parent with little Braille background to use and to follow.

Kindergarten

When Megan entered kindergarten she was seventy percent finished with the Mangold curriculum. We felt that it was necessary to have Braille instruction every day for forty-five minutes, and the IEP team agreed. We had a great rapport with Megan’s itinerant Braille teacher with whom we communicated on a daily basis. Megan had a Braille homework folder in which the teacher recorded what Megan practiced that day and what she—the teacher—wanted Megan to practice for homework. Megan was responsible for helping me

record her homework and report back to the teacher each day. The teacher had a reward system for homework turned in on time, for good work, etc. This was a great motivator for Megan.

Megan finished Mangold during her kindergarten school year and was introduced to the *Patterns* Braille Reading Series from the American Printing House for the Blind (APH), which we are continuing with this summer. This series has helped her transition from uncontracted to contracted Braille. She is a dual-reader, learning and becoming efficient in both print and Braille literacy skills. Megan's latest progress report states that she is on the same reading level in Braille as she is in print. I don't know what her future holds for her visually, but I do know this: she will be prepared for it. She will never have to struggle to learn Braille as an adult like my cousin Kris.

In summary, never settle for less than your child needs. Have the attitude that each transition in a child's life is important. Early intervention and preschool CAN and SHOULD be used to concentrate on preliteracy skills and Braille. Of course, each child is different. Be flexible and be aware of how they learn and use that to their advantage. Be involved and work with your child at home. Be a part of the working team, not just a cheerleader. If you have high expectations for your child's teacher, have high expectations for yourself, too, and be willing to do the necessary work at home. And, yes, a child with partial vision can be successful at learning both print and Braille.

Marla Palmer, a resident of Utah, is a member of the board of the National Organization of Parents of Blind Children. She and her husband, Mike, have three children: Lauren, Adam, and Megan.

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