

Denied Inclusion: Our Family's Story

Shawn Pittman, Mother of Coldon



My name is Shawn Pittman, and I am the mother of seven-year-old triplets Coldon, Ella, and Greyson. Coldon, who has Down syndrome, is in the first grade in St. Tammany Parish. Raising triplets, one of whom has Down syndrome, has been exceptionally challenging, but the toll this school year has taken on Coldon and our family is something I never could have prepared for. Our family dynamic has been far from simple, but in seven years, nothing has been as emotionally and physically draining as the challenges we've faced in the '24-'25 school year.

Coldon has always thrived in an inclusive environment, motivated by his siblings. He has never known a non-inclusive setting—he shared the womb with same-aged, non-disabled peers. Removing him from his siblings and peers in the name of academics would severely hinder his progress in all areas of development, even academics.

His educational journey has been centered on our belief that he must learn alongside his same-aged, non-disabled peers. Before this year, he had no issues integrating into general education classrooms, where he received the necessary support and accommodations. This year, however, has been vastly different. Coldon's general education teacher informed me that he was going to fail first grade—just five days into the school year. Despite being in a general education classroom for 80% of the day and having an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), the school has worked tirelessly to change his placement to the self-contained, segregated classroom.

As a result, he is failing in key areas like Math, ELA, and Reading, and his overall attitude toward school has deteriorated.

Our requests for a flexible curriculum tailored to Coldon's needs, provided in the general education setting, and individualized IEP goals—not directly copied standards from the general education curriculum—continue to be denied. His struggles are further compounded by discrimination from his general education teacher, who claims she “doesn't teach students with Down syndrome.” Due to repeated refusals by the school to move Coldon to another general education class and the district's disregard for federal law, which has led to Coldon's denial of a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), **we have decided to withdraw our three children from the public school system.**

Louisiana's Department of Education (LDOE) dispute resolution process for special education is fundamentally broken, failing to provide proper oversight of special education programs. As a result, families are left with few options: accept inappropriate placement that segregates their child, denying them the inclusive education guaranteed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), or remove them entirely from the public school system. A 2023 COPAA study found Louisiana ranked in the lowest decile in key areas like complaints dismissed, findings of noncompliance, and extended resolution times.



Our experience is not isolated. Many students with disabilities, especially those with Down syndrome, are denied inclusive educational opportunities throughout Louisiana. This often forces parents to hire attorneys or remove their children from the district altogether, an option most cannot afford. Coldon's success has always been due to his interaction with peers in an integrated setting.

IDEA was passed to ensure that all students have access to a FAPE in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). Segregating students from their non-disabled peers has long-term consequences, limiting future opportunities for post-secondary education, meaningful employment, and independent living. **Inclusion is not only a moral imperative but also a legal requirement under IDEA.** It benefits all students, not just those with disabilities. When students with disabilities are integrated, they not only thrive but also teach their peers empathy, respect for diversity, and the value of inclusion. The IDEA was created to support a vision of an inclusive society, and it is time to make this a reality for all students with disabilities.

As your constituent, I ask for your support in strengthening federal special education programs and oversight to ensure students like Coldon receive the FAPE they are entitled to. It is his right to learn alongside his siblings and non-disabled peers.

All students with disabilities deserve the opportunity to succeed in an inclusive environment. I welcome the opportunity to meet with you when you are in Louisiana to discuss how we can address these issues. I am also happy to provide a detailed report of our experience, as well as that of other families, and outline the specific changes needed to support students with Down syndrome to ensure they are provided a Free, Appropriate Public Education that IDEA promises and that Section 504, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) support. Oversight on the federal level is critical to ensuring that the rights of students with disabilities are not being violated.

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue and for supporting and representing your fellow Louisianans.

