
Protecting Hope: Our Family's Fight For Safer Classrooms

Elena Croy, mother of Hope Croy



My husband and I are the proud parents of two extraordinary children, Hope and Henry. Hope came to us on Christmas Eve morning in 2015, and Henry 22 months later. Both have had their fair share of medical challenges—Hope with Down syndrome, a severe heart defect, hypotonia, conductive hearing loss, and hypothyroidism, and Henry with a congenital upper limb difference and idiopathic scoliosis—conditions that transformed our expectations of parenting over the past decade.

Hope is a young lady who loves to express love and to be loved. She speaks English and utilizes sign language through a form known as Signing Exact English. With reddish-brown hair and sparkling hazel eyes behind her purple glasses, she finds her greatest joy in music, whether listening, singing, or performing. Hope embodies her name and exudes joy freely to those she loves.

On December 7, 2020, when Hope was just four years old, **her trusted public preschool special education teacher restrained her with clear packing tape to prevent her from removing her shoes**; the same tape that peels paint off walls, the type you need scissors or a box cutter to slice through. That day, because of the restraint used by her teacher, she couldn't walk properly. She was stripped of her dignity and humiliated. And we, her parents, were alarmed over what we had witnessed and the reality of the unknown we now faced when sending Hope to school every day.

Despite numerous mandated safeguards for students with disabilities, **multiple systems failed Hope**. The school and the district neglected their same-day reporting requirements, other families weren't informed of the potential risks to their children, and the school kept her teacher in the classroom but displaced Hope, despite finding evidence of bullying and intimidation. Our civil rights complaint filed with the New Jersey Division on Civil Rights remains unresolved after four years.

Hope now battles anxiety, a common trauma response for minimally verbal children with intellectual disabilities who cannot engage in traditional therapies. Throughout our persistent advocacy for her right to a free appropriate public education, we've encountered persistent bias and discrimination at every turn.

We must eliminate policies allowing restraint and seclusion as they can lead to physical harm, psychological trauma, and even death. These intervention strategies disproportionately affect marginalized groups, including racial minorities, low-income families, and children with existing support needs. Without legal mandates or financial incentives, districts like ours won't voluntarily adopt less traumatic behavioral strategies, despite clear evidence of harm.

Hope wasn't the first student to be abused at school, nor will she be the last. Our family is also not the first to navigate this type of grief, but with the help of our federal government through the passage of the Keeping All Students Safe Act (KASSA), we can ensure that all children are protected from these harmful practices in schools. KASSA is a federal bill designed to ban and reform the use of restraint and seclusion in schools, provide training for teachers, and ensure that complaints from families and students are investigated and resolved in a timely manner. Had this bill been passed 4 years ago, our Hope, and many other kids with disabilities, might not have been subjected to such inhumane treatment from their educators. **By passing KASSA, we can prioritize the needs of our precious children simply for who they are, as they are.**

