

Hello,

I am a parent of a child with many life-threatening food allergies and I profusely thank the Task Force and the State of Connecticut for giving food allergies in school the attention this disability desperately needs. I'm listing below our experiences/comments from the last year and a half, trying to be as brief as possible.

New personnel: The new principal (2015-16 school year) did not know about the bus policy for food-allergic kids (drivers are trained in administering epinephrine and kids are allowed to self carry) when I asked about it during a 504 meeting. She told me she'd look into it and get back to me which she did, telling me it's not possible for my daughter to take the bus. She also didn't know a food allergy regulation (reasonable accommodation for food at a school event) when she planned a game using marshmallows. With these occurrences, it appears the district didn't educate this new principal as to what the policies and regulations are.

New students entering the school district: After registering my daughter for Kindergarten in the spring, I quickly realized she wasn't "flagged" as a FA student for orientation. All new students were assigned to classrooms and after arriving to hers, I quickly saw Gold Fish on the floor. I asked if this room had been cleaned and the answer was no. I asked if they knew my daughter has food allergies. Again, no. I requested she be moved to a different classroom and she was.

Staff lack of FA knowledge (continuing from above): On the way to the room, the teacher/aide asked "Are her allergies contact?" I replied "It doesn't matter if they are or not, if she touches an allergen then touches her mouth, that's a potential ingestion." This was also asked in other conversations and 504 meetings and my response was the same every time. Clearly, there's a lack of staff education. All

staff at this school are trained in epinephrine administration and signs of anaphylaxis but it appears they are not trained in anything beyond that.

Hand washing: Both Connecticut and CDC guidelines state students and adults entering a FA classroom wash their hands upon/before entering? This school absolutely refused to implement this practice even after four 504 planning meetings and the presentation of these guidelines to them. The district's Director of Pupil Services was present for the last meeting, per our request, and stated absolutely no and that he discussed this with the town's superintendent and they deemed it "not necessary".

Safe snack lists: Unable to give a safe snack list to parents through the school. I asked but was given a firm "No" after a few parents asked me for one. This has been practice in the past but appears to have been inconsistent and is now stopped by the new principal.

Tree nuts/peanuts not allowed in classroom: When my daughter started kindergarten, I met with her new teacher to discuss her allergies and what's needed in the classroom. She told me she replaces nuts brought in by kids for snack with crackers she keeps in her classroom for this purpose. BUT at a 504 meeting, I asked about this again to confirm and the teacher said "No, I don't replace any snacks." The principal then said they "cannot take food away from a child." I asked the teacher why she told me this during our meeting and she said "That was before the [practice] changed." Again, the new principal changed a practice.

Food allergy alert letters sent home to all students' families in the class: This year we added to our 504 the FA alert letter is to be sent home in Spanish in addition to the usual English. Other families at the school have had this for a couple years now BUT the school doesn't offer it to any other families. We had to request it during a

504 meeting. They balked at first but we gave an example of another child having this accommodation. Only then did they agree to it. A couple weeks later, I passed the nurse's office and noticed quite a few index cards on it. All had one word on them, "nurse" translated into all the languages spoken by students' families. The school should be offering to have these letters translated for ALL languages spoken by classmates' families.

Establishing accommodations prior to the 504 planning meeting and without parental input or consent: After a couple weeks in the current school year, we found out our daughter was being moved from her desk to a side table to eat her snack. The school social worker casually informed me of this during a quick hallway conversation. I asked why she was being moved when a letter was sent home to parents alerting them of the allergens. She replied "Well, she's the one with the allergies isn't she." Note these allergen alert letters do not state to not bring the allergens for snack but only to be considerate of the student with allergens.

Substitute nurses: I dropped a form off one morning and found the regular nurse wasn't in. I introduced myself to the sub nurse and asked how often she is here. Her response was "at least once a month." I indicated who my daughter is on the food allergy board (in full view of anyone who goes into the nurse's office). She didn't know my daughter but said she'd "seen her around." I then told her my daughter had a cold over the weekend and the regular nurse was informed yesterday (Monday) and checked her for asthma. This nurse didn't know and made it obvious she wasn't informed of this. What is the process/protocol for sub nurses and teachers? How is pertinent information passed on? Note parents aren't notified if the school nurse is out. If you email her, the sub nurse has no access to that email account, hence not knowing if there is a child who needs attention during the school day.

Allergy alert door signage: When my daughter started kindergarten, the signage was a large, two-foot-wide circle with a peanut and the standard red circle and slash over it. These signs were quite visible from a distance and once closer, one could easily see the complete list of allergens in that particular classroom. This graphic visual indicated that the listed allergens were banned from the classroom. During our 504 meetings, we were repeatedly told they "cannot take food away from a child" when we asked about tree/peanut restrictions in the classroom. Frustrated during one of the meetings, I asked "Then why are there signs indicating allergens are banned? These definitely give the impression they are which give a false sense of security. As our daughter learns to read, how will she interpret this?" They quickly changed to an 8.5 x 11" sign with a cute cartoon animal image taking up 80% of the space, leaving a small amount for the actual allergen list. This sign is visually lost when on a door with many posters/announcements/etc.

Overall experience: Our first year of kindergarten was the most confusing and difficult time. Being new to school and our daughter's rights under the ADA, we found it very hard to get answers about appropriate accommodations under the law from school staff. The district's policy is to reach out to FA parents and inform them of their rights under the ADA - this did not happen. We had to request a 504 meeting. Our impression from the school during and after these meetings, the principal and social worker in particular, was all accommodations fall on to our daughter. All other students would be inconvenienced if made to wash their hands upon entering or move to a different location if they had allergens for snack, for examples. School staff would be inconvenienced if asked to wash their hands (even though this would be a preventative practice for spreading germs during flu/cold seasons as well as preventing allergen exposure!). Teachers would be inconvenienced if students needed to wash hands in the morning as this would take away from

instruction. We were baffled that this staff would prefer to have - and chose to have - a severely allergic student in an environment that was unsafe when the simplest of practices would make it the utmost safe.

Time will only tell how our daughter fare's during these young years at school. Not yet developmentally capable of fully understanding what this all is, she is having difficulty interpreting and navigating situations in school. And I don't feel the staff are receptive to hearing about these things. We are currently dealing with reading and math issues and do wonder, are these the result of not being able to concentrate on instruction because she's worried about allergens? Can she truly be learning if her focus is distracted because her classmate next to her just had peanut butter crackers for snack? Is she actually scared to be in her classroom?

Sincerely, and I thank you again for your dedicated work,

Kim Zolvik

p.s. I purposely left out the PTA. That's a whole other kettle of fish. The district's regulation states "When extra-curricular activities and/or PTA events incorporate food, consideration and reasonable accommodations will be made for students with food allergies." I laugh. This has not happened.