



Don't take away my school

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By AMANIE RILEY

When I first came to the New York Institute for Special Education (NYISE), I had little sense of its history, that for 190 years schools like NYISE have educated deaf, severely physically disabled, and even completely blind students like me. I started at NYISE four years ago, after failing to thrive in the public school system. In public school I felt isolated and academically ignored—I felt that everyone saw me as the “blind girl” and not as a thinking, feeling student like everyone else. Since enrolling at NYISE, however, I am thriving. I feel accepted and valued at my school, and I know I am developing the critical skills that will lead me to become a successful, independent adult. I am looking forward to going to college. I want to pursue a career in social work and help other visually impaired students like myself.

So it was with despair, then desperation, that I heard that Gov. Andrew Cuomo has recently proposed ending direct State funding for New York's 11 schools (the so-called 4201 schools, in reference to a section of state law) that provide specialized services for over 1,500 children who are too severely disabled to be “mainstreamed” into the general student population. The governor is proposing that the \$98 million cost of educating these vulnerable students—students just like me—be shifted to local school districts.

This is not the first time that special education students have been victims of budget politics: Since 2009, total aid to 4201 schools has been reduced by nearly \$9 million. But what people fail to see behind the numbers are the young people affected, people like me who work hard, are dedicated and want to grow up to help others.

What the governor doesn't realize is that students like me cannot be mainstreamed into public schools due to the severity of our primary disability. Many special education students have a disability coupled with other factors, such as autism. Teachers in the public school I attended did not know how to deal with my disability. None had had specialized training in how to teach a blind person. Many of the students at NYISE have been enrolled there only after failing to thrive academically, emotionally and socially in a mainstream setting.

Placement within specialized schools like NYISE has been proven to help children with disabilities develop critical skills which enable them to become independent, successful, tax-paying adults. My school has a 100 percent graduation rate. Graduates attain lives of success and even prominence. Blind, deaf and disabled graduates include pianist, composer and performer Dr. Valerie Capers, the first blind person to graduate from the Juilliard School of Music; Robert Russell, Charles A. Dana Professor of English Emeritus at Franklin & Marshall College; and Seth Weeks Hoard, who as a groundbreaking rowing coach first introduced blind students to the sport in the 1950s.

This legacy has inspired me to strive to do my best. At NYISE I know that I will never be treated as a second-class citizen because I am blind, but rather as a precious individual with qualities and gifts that can and must be developed. My teachers have given me a newfound confidence in myself, and, equally as important, the skills to know that I will be able to take care of myself in the future.

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The governor needs to know that spending money on blind, deaf and disabled children is not an expense but rather an investment in the future—the future of our most vulnerable citizens.

Please visit www.thepetitionsite.com/1/save-ny-4201-school-funding/ and let the governor know that you agree with me. Please join me in the fight to save my school.

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