

## **Q&A with Pete Wright: 'Kids are...Teaching-disabled'** **Patti Ghezzi, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, February 2, 2006**

Parents of special education students know of Pete Wright. They know his Web site, [www.wrightslaw.com](http://www.wrightslaw.com). They know he once represented a South Carolina special education student whose parents wanted the school district to reimburse them for her private school tuition. The case went to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled in favor of the family.

Wright writes books and travels the country with his wife, Pam, teaching parents how to advocate for their kids. [He will be in Atlanta Feb. 11 to speak at the Georgia branch of the International Dyslexia Association's annual conference.](#)

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution talked to Wright, who lives in Virginia, about teaching kids to read, how to keep [Individualized Education Program](#) meetings from going sour and why parents shouldn't resist standardized testing.

**Question:** What is the main issue you'll be addressing in metro Atlanta?

**Answer:** Issues of reading and the law. Reading is a major issue in education. So many children are not taught properly. So many school districts don't have research-based programs. Many kids are not only learning-disabled, they're teaching-disabled, because they don't have a teacher trained in how to teach reading.

**Question:** When you talk about teaching reading properly, are you talking about phonetics, teaching children how to sound out words?

**Answer:** Yes. The sight word approach, it works for some kids. But there are kids who will never learn to read that way. There is not a concept of a nonreader. That is the concept that is out there, that some kids are nonreaders. It isn't true.

**Question:** What programs do you consider ineffective for teaching kids to read?

**Answer:** Reading Recovery. The [National Institute for Child Health & Human Development] has a clear position that was not appropriate.

**Question:** What programs do you believe work?

**Answer:** Orton-Gillingham. That's the one that has been working for many years. School districts run away from it. It requires intense training. There are other programs, Wilson [Reading System] and Lindamood-Bell. They require the staff be well-trained, and I'm not aware of any schools of education that really train teachers in these methods.

**Question:** What mistakes do parents make in trying to get special education services for their child?

**Answer:** If you know XYZ program is the one that is going to work for your child and you go and tell the school XYZ will work and why, you have decreased the chances that will happen. The school district is not going to listen to you.

**Question:** So what should parents do?

**Answer:** Seek a private evaluation from an expert. If they continue with a one-size-fits-all program, they are supposed to provide notice as to why they disregarded your private evaluation. If that happens, they have done a great job giving you a legal case on a silver platter.

**Question:** What about the argument some schools make that the child is making some improvement, therefore their program is working?

**Answer:** Say you went on the South Beach Diet and you are losing a pound every six months. You're showing improvement, but you're not really following the South Beach Diet the way you're supposed to.

**Question:** It seems parents often fear rocking the boat at school for fear that their child will be retaliated against. Do you see that?

**Answer:** I don't think it's fear of retaliation. When parents are afraid to rock the boat, it's usually a personality issue, a fear of confrontation. What we tell parents is you don't set the stage for conflict. You write very nice thank-you letters. You can do it in a nonconfrontational way.

**Question:** Why do so many IEP meetings end with parents in tears?

**Answer:** Oh, you must have a child with special needs.

**Question:** I don't have kids, but I get calls from parents who say they feel like the school representatives gang up on them. How can parents help make IEP meetings go more smoothly?

**Answer:** Never go alone. Always bring another individual with you. The parents' feeling of being overwhelmed generally comes from a feeling of powerlessness, which leads to a negative emotional mind-set. Parents need to understand they are there to market and sell the fact that their child needs the XYZ program.

**Question:** Why do educators get defensive during IEP meetings?

**Answer:** The way the educator sees it, a parent comes in and says, "Y'all are damaging my kid, and my kid's not learning." The educator says, "This person is on my turf, telling me how to do my job."

**Question:** Do most of your cases today deal with dyslexia and other reading problems?

**Answer:** No, about a third of my cases involve reading problems like dyslexia. Another third involve autism, and the rest involve other issues such as inclusion.

**Question:** What are the child's rights under the [federal] law [known as IDEA] with regard to autism?

**Answer:** The same as with any other disability. If schools don't offer the appropriate program, the obligation is to provide an appropriate program. The amount of money spent by the school district fighting parents is astronomical.

**Question:** What are the issues with inclusion?

**Answer:** Some want all inclusion all the time, but full inclusion is doom for some children. They need intense one-on-one instruction first. For children with cerebral palsy and other physical problems, those kids flourish in a mainstream environment, but some schools want to sequester them in a classroom separate from their peers. Around the district, there is no real consistency. Some districts pat themselves on the back for full inclusion when they have students that need one-on-one. A change in administration can cause a 180-degree flip-flop in philosophy, which is very disruptive to the kids and the staff.

**Question:** What about parents of regular education kids who think special education students pull resources away from their children?

**Answer:** That typically happens when emotionally disturbed kids are inappropriately put in regular education classes. It's a powder keg.

**Question:** Is No Child Left Behind good for special education kids?

**Answer:** Yes. The testing of all children whether special education or not is not designed to be a measure of that child's progress, it's a measure of what the school district is doing. . . . The test results can provide clear evidence that the child needs more resources.