

## HB1204

### Testimony

Good afternoon. I am providing written testimony in support of HB 1204. Our names are Frederick Dwayne Williams and Pamela Renee Williams, and we are the parents of 19- year- old Jonathan Williams, who is on the autism spectrum disorder and has ADHD and anxiety. During my pregnancy, I developed complications and had an emergency delivery at 6 months. Jonathan was born weighing one pound and faced numerous medical challenges from birth.

As he grew, Jonathan experienced developmental delays, though he had not yet been diagnosed with autism or ADHD. He was enrolled in the infant and toddler early intervention program with the Howard County Public School System. At four years old, Jonathan was a runner and would try to elope. Additionally, Jonathan was nonverbal. He did not have an IEP yet, but both the school, my husband and me observed behaviors that led to assessments for IEP eligibility.

At the time, Jonathan did not have any support systems in place. One day at Rockburn Elementary School, his class was taken to the playground in front of the school. During this outing, Jonathan managed to slip away unnoticed

He crossed Montgomery Road, a busy street in Elkridge, Maryland. Fortunately, a woman driving by saw him crossing alone. Concerned for his safety, she immediately pulled over, called 911, and began following him at a distance. At the time, the area was mostly wooded, and Jonathan continued walking into the woods. The woman remained on the phone with 911, careful not to startle him while providing updates on his location. Police quickly arrived, located the woman, and were able to find and safely retrieve Jonathan.

If it hadn't been for the woman who saw Jonathan crossing the street, we wouldn't have known where he was. At the time, he was non-verbal and didn't have a cell phone. The police went to the school and met with the principal, who then brought Jonathan back to his classroom and contacted us.

Some immediate changes were implemented following the incident. Gates were installed around the playground, and staff were required to keep them closed at all times. Additionally Jonathan was provided with one- on-one assistance even before his IEP was officially in place.

With these additional accommodations, Jonathan became verbal and was able to grow and learn. He graduated with a high school diploma in 2023 and is now attending community college, where he is pursuing his interest in the arts.

## **Best Practices and Recommendations**

- We recommend notifying the parents as soon as possible. Although this was a frightening incident, we are grateful that the principal contacted us promptly, within three hours of the event. We were able to meet with the principal that same day to discuss what happened, understand the circumstances, and identify solutions to prevent it from occurring again.
- We recommend identifying solutions quickly. The principal quickly implemented solutions, and by the next day, Jonathan was assigned a full-time one-on-one chaperone. This support remained in place for five years until he no longer needed it.
- We recommend having physical structures in place to prevent elopement. The principal collaborated with the maintenance team to have gates installed within a week.
- We recommend processes to account for all children in the classroom. The principal implemented additional checks and balances to ensure that teachers accounted for all children at all times.
- We recommend the schools evaluate the child-to- teacher/ adult chaperone ratio and ensure there are enough staff members to adequately supervise all children.
- We recommend to use proactive measures rather than wait for accidents to occur before implementing necessary systems. In Jonathan's case, it was already known that he was a runner, and the school was aware as well. Schools should not delay implementing support while waiting for an IEP. If a child requires close monitoring, those measures should be in place immediately to ensure their safety.
- We recommend training teachers and staff to recognize elopement triggers, de-escalation techniques, and emergency protocols.
- We recommend including elopement prevention strategies in IEP and 504 Plans, such as one-on-one aides or structured supervision for people who need them.
- We recommend designating calming areas where students can go when feeling overwhelmed instead of trying to leave.
- We recommend that children at high risk of eloping use wearable GPS or Bluetooth trackers with parental consent. Advances in technology now make it easier to monitor their location and ensure their safety.
- We recommend installing cameras near exits and using alarms to alert staff when doors are unexpectedly opened.