

## A Place in the Classroom: Seth's Story

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**With the right support system, a student once isolated from his peers found his way back to learning and belonging.**

When Monica's son Seth was diagnosed with autism at four years old, she could never have imagined the path ahead. Today, he'll be entering eighth grade at his neighborhood public school—a milestone that once felt entirely out of reach.

Seth's early years in education were difficult. Although always placed in special education settings, he struggled to remain in the classroom. Explosive behaviors—driven by sensory overload, frustration,

and difficulty communicating his needs—often made it impossible for him to participate in a typical learning environment.

"He's always been very verbal," Monica said. "But he just didn't have the tools to express himself when he was overwhelmed."

Despite accommodations, Seth's behavioral needs often overshadowed his potential. By fourth grade, he had attended two different therapeutic schools—one designed for students on the autism spectrum; the other focused on behavioral challenges. To keep Seth enrolled, the school began isolating him from classmates. Eventually, he wasn't allowed in the classroom at all—not even in the hallway with peers.

"They kept adding more support and more restrictions," Monica recalled. "But it felt like the goal shifted from helping him learn to just managing him. He wasn't learning. He wasn't with the other kids. He wasn't part of anything."

When both therapeutic schools said they could no longer meet his needs, the family was left with few options—until the school district's placement coordinator recommended Easterseals Academy.

## Finding a Classroom Where He Belongs

Easterseals Academy, operated by Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford, is a nonpublic therapeutic day school serving students with autism spectrum disorder, emotional disabilities, developmental delays, or intellectual disabilities. As a nonpublic school, Easterseals Academy does not accept tuition payments from families. Instead, all students are referred by their home school districts, which cover the cost of enrollment through per-pupil funding. Public dollars, however, don't cover the full cost of the intensive support students need. Philanthropic contributions help bridge that gap—funding academy's specialized services that help each child thrive.

Monica first met with Easterseals Academy team in the spring of 2022 and, from the very first meeting, Easterseals Academy felt different. Staff didn't question whether Seth could be part of the classroom—they assumed he would be.

"The first thing they said was, 'Seth's going to be in the classroom with the other kids, learning,'" Monica said. "I was so struck by that. I didn't even know that could happen for him."

That quiet confidence wasn't a mistake. It was Easterseals' philosophy in action.

"We always have high expectations, and we presume competence," explains Sarah Rose, Director of Non-Public Schools, Education, and Clinical Services. "Families often come to us worried—because at their old school, their child was isolated, or pulled in a wagon, or constantly separated from peers. But here, we give every student the opportunity to show us what they can do before we take that opportunity away."

It's a message woven throughout the program, from individualized placements to a robust Extended School Year (ESY). Unlike many therapeutic programs that pause for the summer, Easterseals' ESY is designed to prevent regression and build momentum, helping students retain skills and grow confidence.

That time—and that belief in him—made all the difference for Seth. During the first summer, he began to thrive. He became more social, communicative, and connected to the classroom community. He wasn't just surviving—he belonged.

Success at Easterseals doesn't look the same for every student. The program tailors goals to each child's needs and strengths, always with the broader mission of increasing independence and building life skills. For Seth, the long-term goal was reintegration into a typical public school. His teachers, support staff, family, and the Chicago Public Schools district all agreed that this was both attainable and in his best interest.

## Thriving Through Support and Inclusion

The goal of reintegration shaped every aspect of his educational plan for the next four years, from providing him with tools for emotional regulation and independence to improving his academic achievement, all while building his confidence and sense of belonging.

"Instead of removing him from the classroom, they helped him learn how to stay," Monica said. "They gave him space when he needed it—like the calm room—but he was never excluded."

"Seth is more confident now," she continued. "He's starting to advocate for himself in little ways. It's incredible to watch."

Equally important were the relationships he built with staff. "He bonded with certain team members right away," Monica shared. "They just understood him. They cared about who he was, not just his diagnosis or behaviors. And that made all the difference."

With that support, Seth began making meaningful gains—not just socially, but academically. A new

diagnosis of an intellectual disability helped his Individualized Education Program (IEP) team better tailor instruction and expectations, making learning finally feel accessible.

"He's still behind grade level," Monica said, "but now he's engaged. He's catching up. Before Easterseals, he just wasn't learning at all."

When it was time to begin transitioning back to public school, Easterseals approached it with the same care and intentionality that had shaped all of Seth's progress. With support from a dedicated reintegration coordinator, his team developed a gradual, customized plan building his capacity across environments before easing him back into his home district.

"Seth didn't go from full-time therapeutic placement to mainstream overnight," Rose said. "We made sure he could generalize his tools across settings. And we had flexibility in how that looked—whether that meant partial days, shared staffing, or extra supports."

## A Team Effort with Life-Changing Results

In collaboration with his school district, Seth transitioned from full-time days at Easterseals to a hybrid schedule, splitting his time between Easterseals and his public school. This fall, Seth will attend public school full-time.

"At the district level, we are incredibly proud of the hard work Seth has put into successfully reintegrating into his home school this fall," said Rebecca McClaney, a Student Services Coordinator at Seth's home school district. "While he was understandably nervous at first, he quickly began building friendships, connecting with staff, and easing right back into the rhythm of school life."

"It is never an easy decision to outplace a student, and our ultimate goal is always to support their return when the time is right," she continued. "Seth rose to the challenge, did the hard work, and is now right back where he belongs."

His journey isn't over, but today Seth walks into school knowing he's included and excited to learn. Thanks to a program that assumed his competence, led with inclusion, and honored his strengths, his path finally feels full of possibility—not just for him, but for every student who has been told what they *can't* do before being given the chance to show what they *can*.

"This achievement is a true reflection of the dedicated collaboration between district staff, the school team, and Seth's family — all working together to support his growth, confidence, and readiness," McClaney said. "It's a powerful example of what's possible when we are aligned in our commitment to

inclusive, student-centered success.”

"I've always believed in Seth—I knew the potential was there—but I didn't always know if he'd be able to be in a classroom, learning and connecting with other kids," Monica said. "At one point, I wondered if homeschooling might be our only option. So, to see him where he is now...it's beyond what I imagined. It took the right combination—Easterseals, the support at home, and a team that truly understood him. They helped him unlock something I always knew was there."