

Ramiro's Story

Ramiro Agudo Arias was born with developmental disabilities as well as significant physical disabilities, including cerebral palsy. As a result, he was not able to speak clearly or walk. Children with disabilities cannot attend school in Ecuador, where Ramiro was born, and there are no government support services, so Ramiro spent his first 10 years at home under his family's care.

In 2001, the family moved to New York City, where Ramiro's father was working. The family connected with the school system, which conducted a thorough set of assessments. In 2002, at age 11, he set foot in school for the first time.

Ramiro participated in a comprehensive year-round special education program including physical, occupational and speech therapy. The results were dramatic. When he entered the school, he was functioning at the level of a one-year old. In two years, he had progressed to the level of a 3-1/2 year old.

The family moved to Minneapolis in 2004, and Ramiro entered middle school. However, trouble soon arose. His level of services decreased greatly, and there were also safety concerns. The school did not administer his medications as it should and did not supervise his eating. He was dropped several times during transfers and had to be hospitalized. Within a short time, he had regressed to the functional level of a nine-month-old baby.

Ramiro's Hennepin County case manager called Arc for help, and an Arc advocate began assisting the family.

The biggest factor was that in New York, all of Ramiro's services were provided in Spanish. When he came to Minnesota, he had no services in Spanish. The school staff couldn't communicate with Ramiro because they didn't speak Spanish. His parents had signed his education plan, but they don't speak English so they didn't understand what they were agreeing to.

Ramiro's mother, Hilda Arias, said through an interpreter, "I would get letters in English from the school, and I would just save them because I didn't know what they said. When I first started to work with Arc, I gave our advocate a stack of letters I didn't understand."

Ramiro was nearing the transition from middle school to high school, so the goal was to help him make a fresh start at a new school. Arc requested an independent education evaluation to be conducted by a bilingual, bicultural provider, and the school district agreed. A doctor at Children's Hospitals of Minnesota performed the assessments, and the findings supported Arc's position: Ramiro's most important need was bilingual instruction.

The school rejected the evaluation and placed Ramiro in a segregated classroom for students with profound mental retardation. Because of his speech problems and lack of prior education, the school assumed that setting was appropriate for him – which it was not.

Arc accompanied Ramiro's parents to a series of confrontational and difficult meetings with school staff. By the end of 2005, the situation had become unworkable. His advocate requested a different school, a one-to-one bilingual aide for Ramiro and a conciliation conference about the evaluation. The district agreed.

Ramiro moved to Roosevelt High School, where he began working with a bilingual aide. At the conciliation conference, the school district agreed to Arc's proposal, which was five-day-a-week programming with speech, physical and occupational therapies. The plan was drafted over the summer, and Ramiro began the next school year with a new IEP based on that report.

"The most important things for me were making sure he gets the therapy he needs and that he has someone to help him in Spanish," said Mrs. Arias. "Now he's getting therapy, and he has a one-to-one case aide who is bilingual to help him."

She added, "Before we started working with Arc, Ramiro was in the same room all day with kids who were much lower functioning than he was. Now he's in a program where he goes from class to class, and he's much more engaged. He's happier and much more relaxed. I'm more relaxed, too, because now he has someone helping him and I know he's safe."

Because of these service improvements, Ramiro is once again making good progress. He is working on writing skills and has improved from writing two-inch letters to one-inch letters. He is learning to identify community signs and what they mean. His speech is improving, and he has a good vocabulary in Spanish. The school now believes he has a lot of language potential.

The bottom line: because of Arc's involvement, the school began attributing a lot of skill to a boy who was presumed to have profound cognitive impairment, and it is committed to providing a good education for him.