STATE OF ARIZONA

2	OFFICE OF ADMINISTRATIVE HEARINGS	
3	Guardians and through	No. 11C-DP-002-ADE
4 5	Petitioners,	
6	-V-	ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE
7 8	Coolidge Unified School District,	DECISION
9.	Respondent.	
10	HEARING: September 23-24, 2010 (record closed December 2, 2010)	
12 13 14 15 16	by attorney Amy Langerman of Amy G. Langerman, PC; attorney Karl Widell of Gust Rosenfeld, PLC, appeared on behalf of the Coolidge Unified School District ("CUSD"), accompanied by Patricia Jiminez, Director of Special Services, CUSD. Certified Court Reporter Diane Donoho of Griffin & Associates Court Reporters was present and recorded the proceedings as the official record of the hearing.	
17 18 19	Exceptional Student Services, Arizona Department of Education; Patricia Jiminez, Director of Special Services, CUSD ("CUSD Director of Special Services") ¹ ; Special Education Teacher,	
20	("Private Day School B Teacher"); Lo	("Private Day
21 22 23	School A Principal"); Grandparent and Legal Guardian to Student ("Grandparent"); Kelly Freudenthal, Director of School Operations, Academic Behavioral Alternatives ("Private Day School B Director"); Steve Casamento, School Psychologist, CUSD ("School Psychologist").	
24	ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE: Eric A. Bryant	

Guardians bring this due process action, on behalf of Student, challenging an individualized educational program ("IEP") sought to be implemented by Respondent School District. The law governing these proceedings is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act ("IDEA"), 20 United States Code ("U.S.C.") §§ 1400-1482 (as re-

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¹ Throughout this Decision, some proper names are not used in order to protect confidentiality of Student and to promote ease of redaction. Instead, the names in bold type will be used.

authorized and amended in 2004),² and its implementing regulations, 34 Code of Federal Regulations ("C.F.R.") Part 300, as well as the Arizona Special Education statutes, Arizona Revised Statutes (A.R.S.) §§ 15-761 through 15-774, and implementing rules, Arizona Administrative Code ("A.A.C.") R7-2-401 through R7-2-406.³

Petitioners filed the due process complaint on August 5, 2010. The complaint alleges that an IEP created in May 2010 and proposed for implementation by Respondent School District in June 2010 does not provide Student a free appropriate public education ("FAPE"), raising numerous procedural and substantive challenges to it. Respondent School District responds in defense of the proposed IEP.

The parties presented testimony and Exhibits at a formal evidentiary hearing held on September 23 and 24, 2010 in Coolidge, Arizona. The parties presented testimony from the witnesses listed above and offered into evidence Petitioners' Exhibits 1 through 15 and Respondent School District's Exhibits A through H, all of which were admitted into the record.

The parties then filed post-hearing memoranda, arguing their respective positions. Petitioners have presented these arguments for consideration:

- (1) The proposed IEP does not offer a FAPE because:
 - (a) it does not provide Student a full-time behavioral coach in the classroom;
 - (b) it does not provide Student an integrated curriculum;
 - (c) it does not identify the placement and location where Student will be educated; and
 - (d) it does not provide a plan for transitioning Student from one school to another.
- (2) The placement proposed by Respondent School District (i.e., Private Day School B) would not provide Student a FAPE.
- (3) The decision of where to educate Student was pre-determined by Respondent School District.
- (4) Stay put placement for Student is at Private Day School A and continues through any appeal process.

² By Public Law 108-446, known as the "Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004," IDEA 2004 became effective on July 1, 2005.

³ It is noted that these rules have not yet been published by the Arizona Secretary of State.

 Respondent School District disputes all of these contentions. Chiefly, Respondent School District asserts that the IEP team determined the placement of Student to be at the private day school level, and that Respondent School District alone may choose to send Student to any private day school as a matter of administrative choice. Respondent School District school district also asserts that the May 2010 IEP offers Student a FAPE and that Private Day School B can meet Student's needs as identified in the IEP.

The Administrative Law Judge has considered the entire record, including the testimony and exhibits,⁴ and now makes the following Findings of Fact, Conclusions of Law, and Order finding that the proposed IEP does not offer a FAPE to Student.

FINDINGS OF FACT

- 1. Student has autism. Student lives with Grandparents, who have custody of Student and are Student's legal guardians. Student is currently in the eighth grade at Private Day School A,⁵ and was in the seventh grade at Private Day School A at the time in question—May 2010. Private Day School A is located about one hour from Student's home and is not within Student's local community or school district.
- 2. Student is eligible for special education under a primary disability category of autism and a secondary category of speech/language impairment. Student has significant behavioral issues. Student can be physically and verbally aggressive to other students and to staff. Because of this, Student requires a highly structured educational environment and individual attention. Student has attended Private Day School A since fourth grade and has made progress.
- 3. On April 29, 2010, an IEP team was convened to perform an annual review and create a new IEP, since the existing IEP for Student was set to expire in May 2010.

⁴ The Administrative Law Judge has read and considered each admitted Exhibit (and listened to audio exhibits), even if not mentioned in this Decision. The Administrative Law Judge has also considered the testimony of every witness, even if not mentioned in this Decision.

⁵ This placement is due to a Stay Put Order issued by this tribunal on August 11, 2010.

⁶ In describing how Student's disability affects learning, the April 2010 draft IEP states: "Social/Emotional needs – Due to extreme outbursts exhibited by [Student] which are usually triggered by introduction to new information and task, [Student] does not perform up to [Student's] levels. Without clear and concise instructions, [Student] refuses to comply with expectations. [Student's] emotional outbursts and refusal to comply with staff directions impedes on [Student's] acquisition of academics that [Student] is capable of learning and progressing adequately in the educational setting." Exhibit 1 at 000008.

Private Day School A had prepared a draft IEP and the IEP team reviewed it.⁷ The team was in unanimous agreement with the contents of the draft IEP. The team did not, however, make a decision as to the school at which Student would be educated. The team agreed that the private day school level of placement was necessary for Student, but CUSD Director of Special Services wanted to extend the meeting to another day to consider schools other than Private Day School A. Another meeting was set for May 11, 2010.

- 4. The draft IEP from April 29, 2010, set forth Student's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, and set goals for Student in the areas of occupational therapy, social/emotional/behavioral, oral communication, writing, and math. The services called for included an integrative curriculum for social/emotional/behavioral instruction and a behavior coach to "assist in providing support in reinforcing social, emotional, and behavior goals." The draft IEP did not state the frequency of the behavior coach's services, but the documentation and testimony submitted at hearing shows that Student's classroom had a full time coach in the classroom at all times and the IEP team understood and agreed that that level of service was what Student needed. The draft IEP also included a Functional Behavioral Analysis ("FBA") for Student and a Behavior Intervention Plan ("BIP") that the team agreed upon, to be used to assist Student with problem behaviors.
- 5. At the May 11, 2010, IEP meeting, representatives from Private Day School B were in attendance along with those persons who had been present at the April 2010 meeting, including representatives from Private Day School A. CUSD Director of Special Services stated that she wanted both private day schools to inform the team of their respective programs and describe how their programs work so that the team could determine whether the programs could meet Student's needs. The representatives for both schools did so. Grandparents expressed their opinions that they did not think that Private Day School B could meet Student's needs.

⁷ Exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1 at 000020.

⁹ Between the meetings, Grandparents had visited the campus of Private Day School B. ¹⁰ Exhibit D at D000011.

7. Toward the end of the May 11 meeting, when it came time to make a decision as to the school at which to place Student, the district announced that the placement determination was to be merely "private day school" and that CUSD Director of Special Services alone would decide which private day school Student would attend because determining location of implementing the IEP was an administrative function and not an IEP team decision. The meeting was then adjourned, with the district taking the question of which location Student would attend school in August 2010 under advisement. Grandparents were to be informed by Prior Written Notice in June 2010.

8. In early June 2010, Grandparents received a copy of the IEP on district forms. That IEP contained several significant differences from the draft agreed to in April. First, whereas the April draft IEP provided Student an integrated curriculum for social/emotional/behavior needs, the May 2010 draft provides for "behavior support" only and not the integrated curriculum that is so important for Student. Private Day School A Principal credibly testified at hearing that "behavioral support" was not the same as an integrated curriculum and that Student needs an integrated curriculum to meet Student's needs. In addition, rather than providing for full time daily support from a behavioral coach as required in the April draft IEP that was agreed to, the May 2010 version of the IEP provides for weekly behavior coach support. That is a significant

¹¹ This belief turned out to be erroneous, per the testimony of Roberta Brown.

¹² Exhibit D at D000002.

¹³ Id. at D000028-D000032.

¹⁴ Exhibit A at A000030.

[&]quot; Id

difference from what the IEP team agreed Student needs for behavioral coach services. Finally, instead of identifying a specific location at which the special education services would be provided, the May 2010 IEP merely states "special schools" in the boxes marked "location." On the cover sheet of the May 2010 IEP, the box marked "Attending School: " is blank. Thus, on the face of the May 2010 IEP, one cannot determine what school the Student will be attending. That decision was not made by the IEP team. 9. The May 2010 IEP states that the least restrictive environment for Student is

- "private day school." 16
- 10. On June 9, 2010, Respondent School District sent a Meeting Notice to Grandparents requesting that they attend a meeting on June 21, 2010, to discuss "site locations" for the private day school placement of Student. 17 The notice stated that "this is not an IEP meeting but rather a parent conference to discuss issue of service location."18 At that meeting, CUSD Director of Special Services told Grandparents that she wanted their input so that she could "be the best decision maker" for Student in terms of "location of services." The parties then discussed the reasons that CUSD Director of Special Services was "leaning toward" Private Day School B. 20
- 11. On June 30, 2010, Respondent School District issued a Prior Written Notice stating that Student's May 2010 IEP would be implemented at Private Day School B in August 2010.21 The notice states that the law distinguishes between educational placement and the location where the IEP is implemented. It states that Student's placement is "private day school" and that the location of the specific private day school is an administrative decision left to the school district. It then provides reasons why Respondent School District believes that Private Day School B would be better for Student than Private Day School A. Most of those reasons are based on the fact that Private Day School B, which is located in Coolidge, Arizona, is closer to Student's home and within Student's home district.

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¹⁷ Exhibit A at A000032.

Exhibit E at E000001.

²⁰ *Id.* at E000014.

Exhibit 3.

12. The evidence shows that Student, as is typical of persons with autism, does not handle change well without significant assistance.²² No plan was created by the IEP team to assist Student in transitioning between schools.²³

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

- 1. Through the IDEA, Congress has sought to ensure that all children with disabilities are offered a free appropriate public education that meets their individual needs. These needs include academic, social, health, emotional, communicative, physical, and vocational needs. To do this, school districts must identify and evaluate all children within their geographical boundaries who may be in need of special education and services. The IDEA sets forth requirements for the identification, assessment and placement of students who need special education, and seeks to ensure that they receive a free appropriate public education. A free appropriate public education (FAPE) consists of "personalized instruction with sufficient support services to permit the child to benefit educationally from that instruction." The IDEA mandates that school districts provide a "basic floor of opportunity," nothing more. It does not require that each child's potential be maximized.
- 2. Once a child is determined eligible for special education services, a team composed of the child's parents, teachers, and others formulate an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that, generally, sets forth the child's current levels of educational performance and sets annual goals that the IEP team believes will enable the child to make progress in the general education curriculum.²⁹ The IEP tells how the child will be educated, especially with regard to the child's needs that result from the child's disability, and what services will be provided to aid the child. The child's parents have a right to participate in the formulation of an IEP.³⁰ The IEP team must consider

²² See testimony of Private Day School A Principal and Grandparent.

²³ This follows from the fact that the IEP team was not allowed to decide that Student should change schools.

²⁴ 20 U.S.C. §1400(d); 34 C.F.R. § 300.1.

²⁵ Seattle Sch. Dist. No. 1 v. B.S., 82 F.3d 1493, 1500 (9th Cir. 1996) (quoting H.R. Rep. No. 410, 1983 U.S.C.C.A.N. 2088, 2106).

²⁸ Hendrick Hudson Central Sch. Dist. Bd. of Educ. v. Rowley, 458 U.S. 176, 204 (1982).

²⁷ *Id.*, 458 U.S. at 200.

²⁸ Id. at 198.

²⁹ 20 U.S.C. § 1414(d); 34 C.F.R. §§ 300.320 to 300.324. ³⁰ 20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)(1)(B); 34 C.F.R. §§ 300.321(a)(1).

the strengths of the child, concerns of the parents, evaluation results, and the academic, developmental, and functional needs of the child.³¹ In addition, if a child's behaviors impede the child's learning or that of others, the team must consider the use of positive behavioral interventions and supports to address those behaviors.³²

- 3. A parent who requests a due process hearing alleging non-compliance with the IDEA must bear the burden of proving that claim.³³ The standard of proof is "preponderance of the evidence," meaning evidence showing that a particular fact is "more probable than not."³⁴ Therefore, Petitioners bear the burden of proving by a preponderance of evidence that Respondent School District has failed to provide a FAPE through the May 2010 IEP proposed for Student.
- 4. This tribunal finds that Petitioners have met this burden by showing that the May 2010 IEP does not meet Student's needs with respect to lack of a full time behavior coach in Student's classroom, a lack of requirement of an integrated curriculum, a lack of identification of a specific location at which Student will be educated, and a lack of a transition plan for Student's move to another school as decided in the subsequent Prior Written Notice. These are substantive failures of the IEP proposed by Respondent School District and deny Student a FAPE. This tribunal also finds that stay put placement for Student is Private Day School A.

DECISION

5. This tribunal's review of the May 2010 IEP is limited to the contents of the document.³⁵ Therefore, the questions of whether the IEP is reasonably calculated to provide educational benefit to Student must be decided on the basis of the content of the IEP itself.

³² 20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)(3)(B)(i); 34 C.F.R. §§ 300.324(a)(2)(i).

^{31 20} U.S.C. § 1414(d)(3)(A); 34 C.F.R. §§ 300.324(a).

Schaffer v. Weast, 546 U.S. 49, 126 S. Ct. 528 (2005). Petitioners' argument that the burden of proof is shifted in this case is without merit and is hereby summarily rejected.

³⁴ Concrete Pipe & Prods. v. Constr. Laborers Pension Trust, 508 U.S. 602, 622, 113 S. Ct. 2264, 2279 (1993) quoting *In re Winship*, 397 U.S. 358, 371-372 (1970); see also *Culpepper v. State*, 187 Ariz, 431, 437, 930 P.2d 508, 514 (Ct. App. 1996); *In the Matter of the Appeal in Maricopa County Juvenile Action No. J-84984*, 138 Ariz, 282, 283, 674 P.2d 836, 837 (1983)

J-84984, 138 Ariz. 282, 283, 674 P.2d 836, 837 (1983).

35 Knable v. Bexley City Sch. Dist., 238 F.3d 755, 768 (6th Cir. 2001), see also Union Sch. Dist. v. Smith, 15 F.3d 1519, 1526 (9th Cir. 1994) (IDEA requirement of a formal, written offer should be enforced rigorously).

<u>The Proposed IEP Does Not Offer a FAPE Because It Does Not Provide Student a Behavior Coach in the Classroom Full-Time</u>

6. The IEP team agreed that Student needs a behavior coach and the record shows that Student needs one in the classroom full-time. The May 2010 IEP offered by Respondent School District does not provide that level of behavior coach services. Therefore, the May 2010 IEP does not offer a FAPE to Student.

The Proposed IEP Does Not Offer a FAPE Because It Does Not Provide Student an Integrated Curriculum

7. The IEP team agreed that Student needs an integrated curriculum for social/emotional/behavioral skills. The May 2010 IEP offered by Respondent School District does not provide such an integrated curriculum. Therefore, the May 2010 IEP does not offer a FAPE to Student.

The Proposed IEP Does Not Offer a FAPE Because It Does Not Identify a Location Where Student Will Be Educated

- 8. Courts have made a distinction between educational placement, which generally refers to an educational program and not the location at which it is implemented, and location at which a Student is educated.³⁶ The determination of the physical location at which an educational program will be implemented has been called an "administrative decision" left to the discretion of a school district.³⁷ However, this is not always the case. In certain instances, an IEP must state a particular school in order to provide a FAPE.³⁸ In *A. K. v. Alexandria City School Board*, the Fourth Circuit appellate court held that the IDEA requires an IEP to name a school when the IEP team agree that a private day school placement is appropriate but the team members do not agree as to whether any particular private day school could meet the needs of the student. That ruling is instructive here.
- 9. Petitioners argue persuasively that in this case, where private day school placement is applicable, the specific school that Student will attend is a decision to be made by the IEP team because private day schools are not all the same. The evidence

See N. D. V. Hawaii Dep't of Educ., 600 F.3d 1104, 1114-1116, (9th Cir. 2010).
 N. D. V. Hawaii Dep't of Educ., Civ. No. 09-00343 SOM/KSC, 2010 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 57045, *22 (D. Hawaii June 9, 2010).

presented shows that there is variety as to the student populations that private day schools serve and variety as to the educational approaches that they take. Coupled with that information is the evidence that autism is a spectrum disorder in which there is a wide array of functional levels for those whom it afflicts. This means that not every or any one particular private day school can meet the particular needs of every or any child with autism. An individualized decision needs to be made as to whether a particular school can meet a particular students needs as identified in an IEP. That is a function for an IEP team, not an administrator. CUSD Director of Special Services impliedly recognized that point when she had each school describe itself to the IEP team at the May 11, 2010 IEP meeting and when she called the June 21, 2010 conference with Grandparents to get their input about which school to send Student to. And the IDEA also recognizes the point when it requires that an IEP state the anticipated location of special education and related services. 39

- 10. This tribunal finds the stance taken by Respondent School District at the end of the May 2010 IEP meeting to be inconsistent with the earlier part of the meeting. Why was it necessary for the team to hear from both schools if only Respondent School District was making the decision? It is not as if the team agreed that both schools could meet Student's needs, leaving Respondent School District to pick between the two. The Grandparents did not believe that Private Day School B could meet Student's needs, but they were shut out of the decision as to which school to send Student to. The IDEA does not condone this.
- 11. The failure of the IEP team to make the decision as to what school to send Student to as well as the failure of the May 2010 IEP to state the location at which Student would be educated denied Student a FAPE.

The Proposed IEP Does Not Offer a FAPE Because It Does Not Provide a Plan for Transitioning Student From One School to Another

12. The record shows that Student has significant trouble with transitions, including transitioning between one school and another. Student requires a transition plan to meet Student's needs if Student is to be educated at a different location. The

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³⁸ A.K. v. Alexandria City School Bd., 484 F.3d 672 (4th Cir. 2007). ³⁹ 20 U.S.C. § 1414(d)(1)(A)(i)(VII; A.K., 484 F.3d at 680.

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⁴⁰ 20 U.S.C. § 1415(j).

⁴¹ Joshua A. v. Rocklin Unified Sch. Dist., 559 F.3d 1036 (9th Cir. 2009).

May 2010 IEP does not contain a transition plan for assisting Student in moving from Private Day School A to Private Day School B as proposed by Respondent School District. Therefore, the May 2010 IEP does not offer a FAPE to Student.

Stay Put for Student is at Private Day School A

- 13. The IDEA provides that "during the pendency of any proceedings . . ., unless the State or local educational agency and the parents otherwise agree, the child shall remain in the then-current educational placement of the child "40 It is not in dispute that Student has been at Private Day School A for the 2009-2010 school year and for Extended School Year ("ESY") 2010.
- 14. This tribunal finds that the "then-current educational placement" for Student for purposes of maintaining the current educational placement under the IDEA is Private Day School A. Stay put requires that Student remain at Private Day School A during the course of this due process litigation, including any appeals.41

Conclusion: Remedy

15. Because the May 2010 IEP does not comply with the IDEA, it is invalid. Respondent School District must reconvene an IEP team to draft a new IEP for Student that provides Student a free appropriate public education consistent with this Decision.42

The other arguments raised by Petitioners are not addressed herein because it is not necessary to decide them given this tribunal's substantive ruling that the May 2010 IEP does not offer a FAPE.

<u>ORDER</u>

Based on the findings and conclusions above, IT IS HEREBY ORDERED that the relief requested in the due process complaint is **granted**. Respondent School District must reconvene an IEP team to draft an IEP that provides Student a free appropriate public education consistent with this Decision.

Done this 22nd day of December 2010...

OFFICE OF ADMINISTRATIVE HEARINGS

Eric A. Bryant

Administrative Law Judge

RIGHT TO SEEK JUDICIAL REVIEW

Pursuant to 20 U.S.C. § 1415(i) and A.R.S. § 15-766(E)(3), this Decision and Order is the final decision at the administrative level. Furthermore, any party aggrieved by the findings and decisions made herein has the right to bring a civil action, with respect to the complaint presented, in any State court of competent jurisdiction or in a district court of the United States. Any action for judicial review must be filed within 90 days of the date of the Decision or, if the State has an explicit time limitation for bringing this type of action, in such time as the State law allows.

Copy sent by **electronic mail** and regular mail this 22 day of December 2010, to:

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