

AFTER LAWSUIT, PARENTS PRAISE NEW SCHOOL THE FAMILY WAS REIMBURSED \$110,000.

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As the school year winds to an end, Ian Wells, formerly a student at Fayetteville-Manlius, prepares for life at yet another school district.

A 10th-grader, Wells is the son of Robert Wells, who took the Fayetteville-Manlius school district to court over the handling of Ian's special education needs. The case was notable not only because the elder Wells won, but because of his position at the time. He was serving on the Fayetteville-Manlius school board.

When the family couldn't get the program they wanted at Fayetteville-Manlius, they paid tuition for Ian to go to East Syracuse-Minoa.

Robert Wells, an environmental consultant, then got a job in Massachusetts, and the family moved. After seventh and eighth grades at East Syracuse-Minoa, Ian spent ninth and 10th grades in Westford, northwest of Boston. Now the family is moving to the Chicago area, where Robert Wells has a new job.

Rebecca Wells, Ian's mother, said she has been satisfied with how other schools served Ian, despite a lot of hopping around.

Fighting Fayetteville-Manlius, and switching schools was initially expensive, but the Wells family eventually recovered much of the legal and tuition expenses. After they prevailed in administrative hearings over the curriculum dispute, they tried to recover \$124,000 in legal expenses, and another \$8,000 to \$9,000 in tuition. At the time, the district itself claimed legal expenses of \$50,000.

The final settlement occurred out of court, and the family got most of what they wanted: all the tuition and \$110,000 in legal costs. The actual cost to the district was considerably less, however, thanks to insurance coverage.

Rebecca Wells said she hopes their experience turns out as well in Illinois as it did in Massachusetts.

She said, "Westford never argued with us that our son was learning disabled. There was good collaboration between special education teachers and regular teachers, and never any argument over additional technical help - calculators and computers. But the biggest difference was the attitude, the acceptance of a learning disabled child as a regular kid who learns differently. Rather than change the child to fit the educational system, they change the system to fit the child."

Geraldine T. Muoio, the assistant superintendent for student services at Fayetteville-Manlius, declined specific comment on the Wells case, but defended the general teaching practices of the staff. "I've been here five years," she said. "In my experience, the faculty and staff are very open, willing, and able to deal with students who learn differently."