

2018 Law School Personal Statement: Ryan Liu

“Wean I wate to the Beach, I med a saed case. I ate at the Beach. I wate in the wetar. I fofd a carb. I sew a fise. The Beach was fun and I me goind to go in....”

During my last semester of college, I received a letter from my old public school district. Sealed within an envelope addressed from the Arcadia Unified School District Special Education Department, the letter informed me that as per state policy, my “special education records would be destroyed” by the year’s end “unless we hear from you.” Curious about what these files contained, I requested them to revisit a period of my education that I had largely forgotten.

I received the package in the mail several weeks later – just in time for when I was contemplating topics for my final assignment at Yale, which was for my “American Education and the Law” class. Inside, the package contained numerous packets of paperwork, individualized education programs, writing samples, and standardized test results. For my final paper, I decided to review these files to understand how my experiences fit into the broader context of special education. In the process, examining these files reinforced my resolve to work within the political and legal systems.

“This is an Asian family in which Mandarin is the primary language spoken” – read my 4th-grade special education referral form, “Ryan is often under his grandmother’s care because his parents work very late.” I rarely heard English growing up as the son of immigrants and refugees who fled the Cambodian genocide. I struggled with school when I first moved back to the U.S. after my early childhood in Argentina. My teachers noticed: “his writing ability is well below grade level... he is quite behind... he rarely passes a math test... he has difficulty expressing himself and organizing his thoughts.”

Evidence accompanied the report: my standardized test scores, which showed my performance at the 6th percentile for reading, 4th percentile in language, and 1st percentile in spelling, and my unfinished six-sentence writing sample that detailed my weekend trip to “the Beach.” The district concluded that I was “eligible for special education under the condition of special learning disability” and recommended annually-updated interventions to address my disability. Tracing the progression of these interventions allowed me to appreciate how special education impacted me. As I read the recommendation to pull me out of class to work with a speech pathologist, I was brought back to the weekly sessions when I’d read sentences aloud from books about King Arthur. As I read about accommodations to help me “produce correctly indented multiple-paragraph compositions,” I was brought back to the two days of classes I attended in the summer before school started to help me review how to write essays. And as I read how “the student will be dismissed,” I was brought back to the pride I felt during my teacher-parent meeting in 8th grade when my teachers and counselors unanimously agreed that I no longer needed special education.

These files highlighted to me how crucial special education was in helping me succeed in school and become the first in my family to go to college. Through contextualizing my experiences with special education’s history, I also realized how this opportunity was only made possible through decades of political advocacy and litigation. For most of U.S. history, disabled students were excluded from public education with court support, such as when the Massachusetts Supreme Court upheld the “expulsion of a student solely” for being too “weak minded” for an education. With *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling that public education “must be made available to all on equal terms,” disability advocates gained a framework to litigate for educational rights for disabled students and lobby for statutory protections.

I wouldn't be who I am without special education. Born a few decades earlier, I'd have a different story as a student too "weak minded" to receive a public education. I owe it to the disability advocates who worked in the legal and political systems years before I was born. I also understand how my story is still unique. Despite being low-income, my parents found a way to live in a school district with the resources to provide a quality special education, even if that meant we all shared one bed growing up.

Work remains to provide everyone access to an adequate education. In community college, I realized how many of my classmates came from school districts that struggle to even provide an adequate general education, let alone a quality special education. With a legal education and the opportunities that I've received, I hope to take on the torch from the generations of advocates who came before me and continue their work within the legal and political systems to guarantee that every child has access to a quality education and socioeconomic mobility. And maybe then, I'll revisit the beach that I'd written about over a decade ago to finish my writing sample.