

HOMETOWN HEROES:

The 'Dream Team':

JENNIFER SZALANKIEWICZ, EMILY MINNIGERODE,
DAWN MCWILLIAMS, AMY SHIFFLETT

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Last spring, when Millersville Elementary revamped its third classroom as a home for children with autism spectrum disorders and challenging behaviors, my first order of business was to fight to place my daughter Leah in that class. Leah is the 'girl with the curl' -- when she's good, she's very good, but when she's off, look out!

I knew, with as much certainty as I know that the sun rises every morning, that Leah needed a teaching team that could manage her 'off' days; otherwise she would be running the classroom by the second or third week of school. Fortunately, the powers that be at Millersville agreed with me that Leah belonged in this 'intensive behaviors' classroom. I have not been disappointed.

Led by the dual threat of special educators Jennifer Szalankiewicz and Emily Minnigerode, this team has not let Leah have the upper hand. She gets lots of tough love, which is exactly what she needs. They have the wonderful senses of humor needed to appreciate Leah's quirks, the warmth and fun needed to reward her when she's doing well, and the stubbornness needed to go toe-to-toe with her when she's not in the mood to cooperate. Thanks to the structure and expectations they have in place, her bad days have been few and far between (at least until the onset of allergy season).

One of my greatest sources of comfort and security comes from the knowledge that even on Leah's bad days, this team takes her in stride. They are excellent at staying a step ahead of her. I don't get messages from school wondering what we should do next. When I visit the classroom, I always get a smile, no matter what kind of day the students are having. These people truly relish the work they do with a group of kids that can be pretty challenging. They make it look easy, but as a parent of one of their students, I can attest to the fact that it is not. Their jobs take talent and dedication, which this group has in spades. Thank you.

NOMINATED BY: Alison Hamilton, Parent