

CAN SCHOOLS AFFORD DISABLED STUDENTS?

Garret Frey was only 4 when he slipped off his father’s motorcycle and severed his spinal cord. Since then Garret, now 16, has been paralyzed from the neck down. He needs round-the-clock care to help him eat and drink, change positions in his wheelchair, suction the tube in his throat and monitor the ventilator that helps him breathe.

Without someone with nursing skills to assist him, Garret could not attend Jefferson High School in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where he is a sophomore and a B student.

But it costs the Frey family nearly \$20,000 a year for the licensed practical nurse who helps Garret. For years, they have been trying, unsuccessfully, to persuade the Cedar Rapids school board to cover the cost. Last November, their dispute reached the U.S. Supreme Court.

“Disabled kids like me have a right to a free education,” Garret says, “without paying for extra care.”

But Cedar Rapids Superintendent Lew Finch insists that his school board doesn’t have the money to pay for the care Garret needs. He points out that the district already has hired a special teacher associate, purchased a special bus and adapted a computer to accommodate Garret. “You have to ask, where do you draw the line,” Finch says. “If the courts open this up, it

could be a bottomless pit.”

Garret’s case could decide just how far schools must go to aid students with disabilities. Federal law requires communities to offer disabled students full access to public education—and a full range of “special education related services.”

But there’s no agreement on how much extra care Garret and tens of thousands of other severely disabled students are entitled to. The Freys hope the Supreme Court will state that the law covers services like Garret’s nurse.

Garret’s insurance has been paying for his nurse. But he has nearly used up his policies, and his family can’t afford to pay for the services on their own. If he loses his case, he might have to finish high school from home.

Garret’s case has made headlines, but he says he’s not looking for any extra attention. “A couple of kids asked me if I thought I was a role model,” he says. “I don’t think of myself that way, but if my case can help change things, I think that would be good.”

The court is expected to issue its decision this spring, but it won’t be soon enough for Garret. “I wish it would all be over,” he says, “and I hope it will help other kids.”

—Susan Hansen

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