

## CASE 27

### Coming Back to School

Wesley Karasov was a top student at West Hills High School until last year, when he sustained a serious head injury in a motorcycle accident. He has undergone months of rehabilitation since the accident, and his parents and rehabilitation therapists believe that he is now ready to return to school. Today, Wesley and his parents are meeting in the school conference room with Wesley's former teachers, Principal Rob Wiggins, and Ms. Gila Seaver, the school's special education teacher. As a group, they will decide on an appropriate placement for Wesley.

After welcoming everyone to the meeting, Principal Wiggins begins the discussion. "Frankly, I'm not sure that he is ready to come back to school at all. I have the report from the psychologist at the rehabilitation center, and it looks as if his test scores just aren't where they need to be, especially for someone in his senior year of high school. In my mind, the best option right now is a private tutor. The school district has an excellent tutor on its payroll, and she could work with him at home for a couple of hours each afternoon."

As Wesley clears his throat to speak, all eyes turn to look at him. "My name is Wesley," he says in a slow, faltering voice. "I would appreciate it if you call me by my name. I am a person, not some object. It's my senior year, and I want to come back to school." Principal Wiggins's face turns beet red.

Wesley's mother, Mrs. Karasov, steps in. "Principal Wiggins, I'd like to remind you that Wesley has had a traumatic brain injury (TBI), something that entitles him to an appropriate education in the least restrictive environment possible. All three of us—Wesley, my husband, and I—have thought and talked a great deal about Wesley's situation, and we all believe quite strongly that his academic needs can be met in a regular high school environment. Since the accident, I've learned a lot about traumatic brain injuries. For instance, I've learned that people with TBI sometimes have rapid, and often quite sudden, improvements in mental capacity. These people need stimulation, and they need to be challenged."

"If Wesley were to come back to school right now, he'd probably have to spend most of the day in my special education classroom," Ms. Seaver observes. "His test scores are way below grade level. For example, I saw in the psychologist's report that he's reading at a first-grade level now. How can he possibly keep up with his classmates if he can't read high school level textbooks?"

Mrs. Karasov bites her tongue as she tries to keep her temper. "You've been looking at the test scores on *rimed* tests, Ms. Seaver. Kids with head injuries usually need more time than other kids to think about what they read. Besides, Wesley took those tests eight months ago. He's grown a lot—mentally, I mean—since then."

As Principal Wiggins opens her mouth to respond, Mr. Karasov enters the conversation. "With all due respect, Principal Wiggins and Ms. Seaver, I think you're both grossly underestimating what Wesley is capable of doing. If you don't mind, I'd like to try a little experiment. I borrowed one of your school's history textbooks

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from a friend of Wesley's, and I've brought it with me today." Handing the book to the principal, he continues, "Choose any chapter you like, Principal Wiggins. Then let's send Wesley to the library to read it while we continue our discussion. Is that okay with you, Wesley?"

"I'll do whatever it takes to get me back in school," Wesley responds.

Wesley's parents and the members of the school faculty are in a heated debate when Wesley returns to the conference room with the history book and several sheets of notes. Principal Wiggins asks Mr. Hermanowitz, Wesley's former history teacher, to quiz Wesley on the chapter's content. Occasionally referring to his notes,

Wesley correctly answers every question that Mr. Hermanowitz asks him. Principal Wiggins looks at her colleagues, and their agreement about the situation is clear. She turns to Wesley and smiles. "I guess we owe you an apology, Wesley. You definitely **are** ready to come back to school. What can we do to make your life easier here at West Hills High?"

"Well, rna'am," Wesley responds, "I get tired easily. Sometimes I need to take a nap during the day. I forget what to do if I don't write things down. And mostly, I **just** need more time than the other students...."

As he attends his classes each day, Wesley keeps meticulous notes about the assignments he needs to complete and the due date for each one; as a result, he's been far more diligent than many of his classmates in getting his work done. He takes all of his tests in a room near the main office so that he has time to think about each question carefully; when he spends so much time completing his tests that he's late to other classes, the school secretary sends a note along with him to explain his tardiness.

By the end of second period each day, Wesley is so exhausted that he takes a two-hour nap on a couch in the nurse's office, but he wakes up refreshed enough to attend two more classes in the afternoon. The only drawback to his routine is that he's had to drop two of the classes he needs to graduate.

Meanwhile, Wesley's teachers are so impressed with the **young** man's determination to succeed that they bend over backwards to **help** him succeed. Aware of his difficulties in processing information quickly and in remembering what he's read and heard, they make a variety of accommodations on his behalf. For example, Wesley's mathematics teacher assigns him only half of the in-class exercises that she assigns the rest of the class; she asks him to do the remaining exercises at his leisure at home. His English teacher always writes directions to assignments on the board and then states them orally as well. His history teacher signals main ideas by saying, "This is important, so put it in your notes."

Ms. Struthers, Wesley's French teacher, is the most accommodating of all. Although Wesley had three years of French prior to his accident, he remembers very little of what he used to know so well. Although he's officially enrolled in French IV, Ms. Struthers teaches him out of the French I textbook. She encourages Wesley to speak in French in class, but she's patient when he struggles, and she occasionally

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gives him a word he needs if he has difficulty remembering it on his own. And whenever she gives her class a quiz, Wesley takes a French I quiz instead. In a follow-up meeting, Wesley expresses his gratitude that the teachers are being so helpful and supportive. Other than having to give up his third- and fourth-hour classes, he thinks he has made a smooth transition back to school. Ms. Wiggins notes that all of Wesley's teachers are pleased with his progress.

NOTE: Wesley earned A's in everything except French that semester; however, he finished two courses shy of the school's graduation requirements. The school allowed him to attend his class's graduation ceremony in May but did not award him a diploma until August, after he had completed the missing courses in summer school.

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**Possible questions for "Coming Back to School":**

**What accommodations did school personnel make for Wesley's disability?**

**If you had Wesley in your classroom, what other strategies might you use to help him succeed?**

***Zone Proximal Development (ZPD) is the range of tasks that a student can perform only with the assistance of a more capable individual. What strategies does the French teacher, Ms. Struthers, use to make sure that Wesley is working within his ZPD?***

***Should Wesley be officially enrolled in French IV? Why or why not?***

***What mistakes do Principal Wiggins and Ms. Seaver make when they interpret the test scores that the psychologist has reported?***

***Under the circumstances, should the school waive some of the graduation requirements in Wesley's case? Why or why not?***