Terrence Rideau was a middle school student when his mother, Breggett Rideau, noticed his unexplained injuries at the end of the school day—a severe bruise on his head, a dislocated knee, a fractured thumb.

Now 21, Terrence has severe cognitive and physical disabilities and uses a wheelchair. He could not tell his parents what was happening in his classroom. But what the Keller, Texas, family learned over years of legal battles led to a $1 million jury verdict against the school district, and eventually to a law that makes Texas the first state in the country to require cameras to be installed in self-contained special education classrooms at parent or teacher request.

That law, which went into effect this school year, has raised complex questions about the cost to districts, student and teacher privacy, and even whether cameras will meet the goal of protecting children.

On the cost issue, for example: Texas districts have interpreted the law to mean that when a parent or teacher makes a request, cameras need only be installed in the classroom where that parent's child is taught or where that teacher provides instruction.

But well after the start of the school year in Texas, the state attorney general said that the law as currently written means that one request from a parent or teacher will trigger installation of cameras in all the self-contained classrooms in a district. That's not what the camera-law sponsors said they intended, but that interpretation means that districts might need to shoulder a potentially multimillion-dollar expense all at once.

Rideau sees the attorney general's guidance, which was released last week, as a triumph. She wants to help all children in the state who are as vulnerable as her son was to abuse.

"There is nothing you do in the United States outside of your house that is not on camera," said Rideau, who said that her son is doing well in his last year in the 35,000-student Keller district. "If you're a not a thief, it doesn't bother you when you're at Walmart. But if you're a thief, a camera is a hindrance. We're going to protect canned goods more than we protect children?"

Rideau eventually learned that "Lil T's" middle school teacher had kicked him and other students, and dropped him at least once when moving him to and from his wheelchair. She has been called by families from around the country, who ask how they can have similar camera laws passed in their own state.
"How these states write these laws that protect the teachers and the staff and not the reasons for their jobs, which are the students, I'll never know," Rideau said.

**Long Path to Passage**

The road to cameras in Texas for those classrooms was a long one. And it started with Terrence's bruises and injuries.

School officials first told his family they didn't know how Terrence was being injured. But later, the Rideaus found out that other school staff members had reported that Terrence's self-contained classroom teacher was handling students roughly, particularly those who needed the most care, such as Terrence. The teacher reportedly even engaged in petty slights, such as eating the cookies that were part of Terrence's lunch.

The Rideaus didn't find out about those concerns until two years after they were reported. The $1 million jury award is believed to be one of the largest of its kind against a school district for violations of the Americans with Disabilities Act, said the Rideaus lawyers.

The federal government does not keep records on how many children are injured in special education classrooms. However, it does keep track of how many special education students are restrained and secluded at schools, which can lead to injury. **According to the U.S. Department of Education**, about 12 percent of all students receive services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, but special education students were 67 percent of students restrained or secluded during the 2013-14 school year.

Rideau said that cameras in the classroom would have made it easier to prove what was happening to her son. She visited with lawmakers dozens of times, arguing for a camera bill. During the last legislative session, she drained her retirement savings and hired a lobbyist to shepherd the bill through. It passed in 2015.

But some disability advocates say that cameras, while seeming to provide protections, may cause additional problems.

TASH, an advocacy organization that works on behalf of people with severe disabilities, **released a position paper in 2015 saying that it opposed cameras in special education classrooms**. Among the organization's concerns: Cameras might drive abuse "underground" into private areas that are unmonitored. Schools and parents might also be swayed into placing children in self-contained classrooms with cameras for their perceived safety, when the child could be more fully included in general education classrooms, which are camera-free.

Self-contained classrooms are those designated specifically for students with severe disabilities. Often, the students in such classrooms require assistance with personal needs, such as feeding or toileting, and instruction is generally focused on life skills. But many students with complex support needs can still learn in regular education classrooms, TASH argues.

These camera laws have "the potential for new and more entrenched types of discrimination and abuse to emerge," the organization said in its position paper.

School districts, on the other hand, focused primarily on the costs. The legislators estimated that classroom cameras might cost districts around $150 each, but that's way too low, said Amanda Bigbee, the lawyer for the Keller district. "There's no way you can do all the functionality that is required at that cost." The video recording must cover the entire classroom, in some cases must capture audio, and
the video must be saved for no fewer than six months. There's no provision in the law for removing the cameras, other than if the room is converted to something other than a self-contained special education classroom.

The Keller district has had requests for seven cameras and has installed six already, at a cost of $2,500 to $3,000, Bigbee said.

Attorney General Ken Paxton's legal guidance has districts particularly concerned. Nothing in the law restricts requests to one classroom, he wrote in a letter to the Texas Education Agency.

That guidance represents "a paralyzing financial burden, to be honest," said Bigbee. The Keller district has about 120 self-contained special education classrooms. "I suspect we're going to take a deep breath and see what the [TEA] has to say."

**A 'Delicate Situation'**

Sarah Orman, a senior staff lawyer for the Texas Association of School Boards, said that districts "might decide it's worth it in the long run to interpret the law in accordance with the sponsors' intent," which is that requests be handled on a classroom-by-classroom basis. Doing so would be counter to the attorney general's assessment, but with the legislative session starting again in a few months, districts may decide that it is worth waiting to see if the law is amended, she said.

Also, the Texas law does not cite a time frame for when cameras must be installed after a request is received, Orman noted.

"It's going to be a very delicate situation," she said. When districts receive camera requests—and dozens have come in since the start of the school year, Texas newspapers report—"we're encouraging them to see it as an opportunity to build trust with parents."

The funding concerns might be unimportant if the cameras protected students with disabilities from harm, but that's not clear. Janna Lilly, the director of governmental relations for the Texas Council of Administrators of Special Education, said a camera vendor told her that people tend to forget the cameras are there. Lilly's organization supported the bill but wanted state funding to help pay for it.

TASH's concerns, in addition to the potential of prompting abuse out of the camera's view and less inclusion, is that the cameras might be used to provide surveillance on students themselves. Instead of cameras, the organization wants more widespread adoption of schoolwide behavior-management programs and fewer students placed in isolated, self-contained settings.

**Emotional Topic**

Such arguments may find it hard to make headway against the power of video, however. More than 27,000 people have joined the **Cameras in Special Needs Classrooms** Facebook community, which features troubling images of cut and bruised children and news stories about students injured at school.

A Plano parent, Beth Watson, testified on behalf of the camera bill in Texas. A classroom camera recorded a 2012 incident in which a Plano teacher dragged Watson's then 8-year-old son with autism into a "calm room" and knocked the child to the floor as he removed the boy's shoes. The teacher then held the calm-room door closed with his body.

The camera didn't prevent the teacher's behavior. But it did provide evidence that backed up the student's story. An investigation of the incident did not start until two years later, when a local television station started asking questions.
With her son sitting on her lap, Watson told the committee that the video gave her family power. "Because that video is there," she said, "we are now able to seek justice for Micah and make a difference in other children's lives by making sure that these things cannot happen to other children."

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