

• CASE STUDY •

How CAAEL helped Jake Moran **build** self-discipline, **develop** leadership skills, **find** belonging, and successfully **rejoin** his mainstream high school



"Thanks to CAAEL, Jake began a path that yielded big results in quantum leaps. He would look forward to games and be so motivated to keep his attendance, grades, and behavior in check so he would not miss an opportunity to shine. He had a chance to display and be recognized for effort, work ethic, and a winning attitude — and he started winning sportsmanship ribbons, which led to an enormous sense of pride as a leader. So many things came together for Jake that he was eventually able to bridge the gap back to his mainstream high school. A total dream come true after four years."

JAYMA GRIFFIN

Jake's Mom

Jake Moran — and his mom, Jayma Griffin — first learned about CAAEL when Jake was a middle school student at Plainfield Academy's Therapeutic Academic Program.

Jake has been living with autism since he was 18 months old and after a long and extensive road of intervention therapies, he'd been able to attend mainstream elementary school since first grade with lots of supplemental special education support.

Yet despite the progress Jake had made cognitively and academically through the years, the social aspect of life and school was one area where he consistently struggled.

"The perils of recess, the lunchroom, and gym...it's an ever-changing, unpredictable and far less structured jungle than the classroom," said Jayma.

"These social times were a nightmare for Jake, especially since he hadn't had the opportunity to connect with other kids through activities after school like other kids do. From the time most kids are toddlers, we sign them up for any team, class, or program, but it's not like that for kids with a disability.

"Jake really wanted to play sports, but all of his classmates had been playing sports and involved in activities for a decade longer than him, and his frustrations and anxiety grew because he couldn't keep up. He was so overwhelmed."

Jake agreed. "I had a hard time winning and losing," he said. "Gym was a daily struggle for me. My anxiety made me feel that everyone was judging me because they had more experience than me."

As Jake's social struggles continued to increase, he transitioned to the therapeutic program at Plainfield Academy to begin middle school.



Despite being a better learning environment for him than mainstream schooling, it was still an uphill battle to find his footing socially.

“Middle school is hard for most every kid, but compounded greatly when you have a disability,” Jayma said. “Bullying is real, and it’s especially pervasive among teens and around competition. When gym is hard for you socially and teams are all about the W, you don’t really get a chance to play, let alone feel good. Jake desperately needed connection and an opportunity to shine.”

Jake knew that once he got to high school he’d have the opportunity to take part in CAAEL — an in-school program that provides a variety of athletic and educational activities to kids in alternative schools.

The prospect of participating in CAAEL excited Jake, and when he entered his freshman year, CAAEL



became his biggest motivator — as well a huge catalyst for his social and emotional growth.

“I’d heard about CAAEL since middle school and couldn’t wait to get to high school to experience it, too,” Jake said. “When I started my freshman year, I started learning ‘The CAAEL Way’ and how CAAEL was all about sportsmanship and being a leader to other kids. **It was important to me to keep my grades up and keep my behavior together so I was able to play for CAAEL every week.**”

Jayma said CAAEL provided the opportunity for Jake to finally play sports, while also filling the social piece that had been so missing in his life.

Once that gap was filled, amazing things started to happen.

“Thanks to CAAEL, Jake learned things like acceptance, sportsmanship, leadership, and teamwork,” Jayma said. **“CAAEL provided an outlet for Jake to shine.** He didn’t have to be the best in the sport to see playing time or to be chosen, because CAAEL rewards effort. Kids celebrate inclusion, and cheer on their teammates and their opponents. Jake learned ‘The CAAEL Way’, where it’s about lifting people up for what they can do.

“He would look forward to games and be so motivated to keep his attendance, grades, and behavior in check so

he would not miss an opportunity to shine — and he was eligible for every single game for two years straight.

“He started winning sportsmanship ribbons, which are awarded by the opposing team, which then led to an enormous sense of pride as a leader. Here he was — a child who had struggled so hard socially to fit in, or even make a friend, who now was able to feel an elusive quality like leadership.”



Jake experienced so much growth and so many positive gains that **he was able to return to his mainstream high school for the start of his junior year** — but not before Plainfield Academy recognized him for all of the amazing work and accomplishments he’d achieved.

“Plainfield Academy recognized Jake for winning 10 CAAEL sportsmanship ribbons, and had a trophy made for him that featured a basketball, softball, and volleyball player,” Jayma said. “[Plainfield Academy Assistant Principal] Tracy Beneventi helped to spread the news of his success and Plainfield District 202 wanted to honor

Jake as well. He was invited to the year-end district meeting to be awarded for excellence in sportsmanship alongside all the other athletes from multiple sports that had gone to state that year."

During his junior and senior years at Plainfield High School, Jake continued playing sports. He participated in a recreational volleyball league and played high school basketball with the YMCA.

"Thanks to CAAEL, Jake has had the ability and confidence to fulfill his dreams of playing sports and — above all else — feel a sense of belonging," Jayma said.

Jayma acknowledges how crucial CAAEL was to Jake's growth and

success, and believes that any student can benefit from CAAEL's programming and positive philosophy.

"If you have never been to a CAAEL game, it's a really moving experience and something truly magical to behold," Jayma said. "Everyone wins, and not just those on the court or the field. They win in the marrow of their bones. The win is being able to play. The win is being accepted. The win is belonging.

"There is so much you can't control in life, and you have to play the hand you're dealt. But having a chance to display effort, work ethic, and a winning attitude — and to be recognized for that — is worth more than its weight in any gold medal or trophy.

"The way CAAEL made Jake feel, the way he got to participate, and the way it allowed him to lead others has **changed his life**, just by giving him the chance. I'm so thankful for CAAEL and what it has done for my child — and what it's doing for thousands of others, too." 🏀





To learn how CAAEL can help your alternative school provide athletic and educational programming to motivate and inspire your students, go to caael.org