

Exactly what he wants to say

After a classroom activity, [Booker T. Washington Elementary School](#) teacher Wendy Taylor accidentally spilled a set of building blocks across her desk. As she finished picking them up, her student LaSpencer Saunders used his communication device to tell her, “wall.” Taylor checked between her desk and the wall and found a block that had fallen and escaped her notice.

“The thing is that I never taught LaSpencer ‘wall,’” says Taylor, who works with students who have complex communication needs. “He used his device, which groups vocabulary words and concepts by categories, to find the word he needed.”

LaSpencer and his classmates have been speaking their minds much more often since CDS’s [Systematic Processes for Enhancing and Assessing Communication Supports \(SPEACS\)](#) started a literacy initiative in the 2018–2019 school year. SPEACS, a program for training and supporting educators working with children who have complex communication needs, has added an emphasis on literacy to its training aimed at moving students from pre-symbolic to more conventional communication. [Kent County Community School \(KCCS\)](#) and its site at Booker T. Washington embraced that approach.

“Why the emphasis on literacy?” says SPEACS Instructional Coach [Megan Conway](#). “Communication takes many forms: speaking, listening, reading and writing. Each dimension strengthens underlying language abilities.”

While engagement with print is commonplace in classrooms of students without disabilities, this element is often lacking in educational programming for children with complex communication needs. “Communication doesn’t have to be verbal,” says KCCS Instructional Coach Michelle Houston. The SPEACS approach helps fight the mistaken assumption that children who use augmentative and alternative communication supports, either low tech or voice output, will not benefit from literacy instruction, she says.

Taylor says LaSpencer and his classmates show pride in their written work, often asking to revisit their products again and again. LaSpencer has also stopped using his communication device’s prerecorded greeting, opting instead to spell out his name and introduce himself that way. He’s showing how he uses the power of language to say exactly what he wants to say, exactly the way he wants to say it.



LaSpencer Saunders revisits the booklet *Colors* that he and his classmates created.