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Thomaston

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To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing today to urge you to consider and accept LD 552- "An Act to Strengthen the Individualized Education Program Process".

I am writing to you today as a mother to Brian, a 16-year-old son with autism who has an IEP, and also a mother to Corbin, an 18-year-old son who has a 504. Though I know a 504 plan is not included under this bill I include him as well as he was a student with an IEP from a 3-year-old in the world of CDS to 8th grade. I have to say that there were many times in my 15 years of advocating for my children's needs that this bill would've made a serious positive impact on their education.

I just want to speak today about the most recent occurrence. In March 2020, we met for Brian's annual IEP meeting. At that time we assumed we would be meeting in just a few more weeks to go over Brian's triannual evaluations that were also due. The topic of Extended School Year (ESY) services was brought up. I voiced my concern at that time that while Brian was in elementary and middle school he received four hours, four days a week, for six weeks of ESY services. I was told as he was now a ninth-grader in a new program in a new school and that their program only ran for four hours a day, three days a week, for four weeks each summer.

I voiced my concern that Brian's ability to maintain his skills over the summer didn't just magically change because he was now in a different program (for the record I also fought for his program that he had much success in at middle school to be carried to the high school but that was denied). I fought that it wasn't meeting HIS INDIVIDUALIZED needs by just saying that this is how the whole high school program does it. At this meeting, the administrator agreed with me and said that perhaps we could make an individualized plan for Brian that included attending the life skills summer program but also having additional 1:1 time with an ed-tech to work on his academic skills with his ACES curriculum. However, as we knew we were meeting again in just a few weeks he said we could solidify a plan then.

And then of course, as we all know, COVID happened and schools closed and that meeting was never had. In the spring of 2020, we were sent the plan for Brian's Extended School Year services. I was disappointed to see they wanted to offer him an hour a day, four days a week, for four weeks virtually. Because I am also an occupational therapy provider for the same school district I was aware that some of the district's ESY programs were happening in person. I immediately called for an IEP meeting to discuss how we could better meet Brian's needs over the summer and to see why some students in the district were getting in-person learning while others weren't, particularly after seeing that remote learning did not fit Brian's learning style through the spring.

At that meeting, Brian's IEP was changed even though I voiced my concern over and over again about how he would regress so much and not be able to recoup within a reasonable amount of time. Over the next couple of months, Disability Rights came on board to help us advocate and we ended up in mediation. However, the fact was that Brian's IEP was changed without consensus. He lost a summer on top of already losing services during COVID- his IEP now reads 4 weeks a summer even though I fought over and over again that that would not meet HIS individualized needs. Basing a child's IEP around a program's availability or "the way we've always done it" is not meeting a child's INDIVIDUALIZED needs. A parent's voice should carry as much, if not more, weight than every other member on the IEP team. As a parent, I can vouch for the amount of time, education, tears that we have put into learning about our child and their needs and the services available that they would benefit from. I understand that teams aren't always going to be at a consensus but the ability to maintain an IEP as written while going through the same Due Process procedures is life-changing for our children and our families. As a professional who has worked in the special education field in some capacity since 2005, I can also tell you that I ALWAYS learn from the parents of the children I work with and value their voices as a very important part of our team. I always tell them that no one knows their children like they do. So from both roles that I play, I value this proposal.

I also need to throw my support to the part of the proposal for having education technicians be a part of the IEP process. Brian has been in self-contained programs most of his education and there is no one else in that school that knows him as well as the professionals who spend day in and day out with him- his 1:1s. I have requested throughout the years for his ed techs to be a part of his IEP meetings and was always told they couldn't attend due to staffing issues during the IEP meeting.

Sincerely,  
Heather Nelson

