

Lisa Cataldi

From: Catherine Holtman <choltman12@gmail.com>
Sent: Wednesday, March 13, 2024 1:58 PM
To: House Education Committee
Cc: Rep. McGaw, Michelle E.; Rep. Cortvriend, Terri-Denise
Subject: In Support Bill H7721

Dear Honorable Members of the House Education Committee,

My name is Catherine Holtman, and I am the parent of a child with an IEP in Portsmouth, RI and I also support the work of SPEAR. I am in support of Bill H772 to improve the IEP process for families of children with disabilities. I went through a 2-3 year process to obtain an IEP for my child who has dyslexia and ADHD, and felt during that process we were at a disadvantage because the current laws do not protect families and ensure they are equal members of the team – as they are meant to be.

Our son went through some of his testing at the district level, and in our first eligibility meeting the district refused to share the evaluations with us ahead of the meeting. Having very little experience with the special education process or education on learning disabilities, my husband and I sat through most of the hour-long meeting confused as they team spoke in a various education terms that we were unfamiliar with. We were fortunate enough to be able to hire an advocate (at the rate of \$150 per hour) who spoke on our behalf, but I can tell you even with this support, we left the meeting not understanding that our son had been found ineligible and not even being able to intelligently converse with the team because the data was being presented to us for the first time in that meeting. Parents are put in a powerless position when information about their child's education is intentionally held from them and their voice on the team silenced. Given that laws like this already exist in states like MA and VA, RI should follow suit.

Fortunately, after a loud outcry from citizens in our town around the unethical special education practices taking place, at the direction of our School Committee, our district began making changes last year (the same year we finally obtained an IEP) and we have since been provided with drafts of documents (such as the IEP) prior to the meetings, which has been incredibly helpful in not only understanding the process, but ultimately getting our child the needed support. It is not a fair or equitable system to leave these practices in the hands of the districts, but instead it should be law. . Portsmouth hired a new Special Education Director when they implemented changes, but our former Director of Special Education moved on to the Bristol – Warren with our former Superintendent, where they can continue with these unethical practices.

Additionally, this bill would provide parents with the ability to tour placement options and give them the ability to accept and reject portions of the IEP, affirming that we have a say in the decision and are being heard as members of the team, as we are intended to be.

I hope that is apparent to everyone, that the support we give our children today, not only impacts their future, but the future for us all. These children are our future employees, leaders, mothers, fathers, and role models. Like many children, my child has exceptional potential when the right supports are put in place for him to learn.

Thank you for your service and time.

Best,

Catherine Holtman

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