

March 13, 2024

The Honorable Joseph M. McNamara
Chair, House Committee on Education
State House
Providence, RI 02903

Re: Testimony in SUPPORT of H-7221

Chair McNamara:

My name is Crystal Rose Greene and I am testifying in support of H-7221, a bill that would strengthen parental rights in the IEP process. The way things are currently, an IEP can be changed without parent consent. In addition to this, when changes are made, whether to a student's placement or based on evaluations, the parent doesn't get to review evaluations prior to the meeting or visit the new educational setting.

This bill would:

- Require schools to share evaluation reports and other important documents with parents in advance of IEP meetings;
- Give parents the right to observe placements proposed for their children; and
- Restores the requirement to obtain written parental consent before implementing changes to a student's IEP.

I am supporting this bill because as a mother to four children with multiple needs I realize that cooperation with the district can go one of two ways. Our family has been on both sides of the table of cooperation versus battle royale with the district over and over and over again. Three of our children have an IEP and one has a 504 plan. I am extremely well versed in the tedious, extremely cumbersome and exhausting IEP process. It takes an incredible amount of resources in the form of time, energy and finances to obtain the neuropsych evaluations and the doctor's diagnoses and medical records required to secure the IEP. Even more draining and frustrating is the retention and reinforcement of the IEP.

Our youngest son, Benjamin, is hearing and visually impaired, has Down syndrome, Autism, Epilepsy and a plethora of other diagnoses. At three, it would have been extremely helpful to have had the opportunity to visit the out of district placement areas capable of supporting Ben's education, in order to make a more informed and educated decision about Ben's placement. After gaining placement at Meeting Street for Ben, we waited over a year for them to find "appropriate staffing", which never came. Ben did receive services for a couple of months at Meeting Street, but never was afforded the luxury of an education at Meeting Street.

IF I were able to tour other locations, I would have chosen Sargent Rehabilitation Center for Ben to attend, years ago. He would have begun his education years earlier, instead of waiting for our dream placement, from which he was excused due to "lack of appropriate staffing". However, I am a firm believer in you get what you need. As one door closed, another door opened. Currently at age six, Ben is thriving in the loving, caring, nurturing environment at Sargent in which his annual IEP meetings have included multiple handfuls of staff members that support Ben. The IEP meetings at Sargent are cooperative, collaborative and like nothing I have ever seen prior, with my other children. The IEP goals

are clear, well written and enforced. Open communication among us as parents, Sargent staff, and Ben's extensive physicians and therapists at Boston Children's Hospital and Bizzy Bee Therapy is extraordinary!

Outside of Sargent, our experience has been less smooth. For anyone with public speaking anxiety, having materials to review beforehand is key to ensure adequate preparation and representation. Full team meetings are also held quite frequently throughout the academic year to ensure that the IEP is being followed, as written. Prior documentation and the ability to obtain written parental consent before implementing changes to a student's IEP as it comes up in annual review, full team meetings etc is key.

Having support and being able to view the IEP documents prior to the meeting will allow parents the ability to conduct research, gather evidence and fully prepare prior to the meeting. As a Communication Studies Professor at the University of Rhode Island, I am well organized and spoken as well as professional. However, I have been egged on enough by the district to get flustered, lose my cool and want to quit as the struggle was long, so frustrating and so unnecessary. This is especially true when engaging in this process for four out of four of our children in our local district of Exeter West Greenwich.

I urge you to vote in favor of bill H-7221. The IEP process is daunting for even the most educated, dedicated and committed parents. For those parents with less knowledge, experience or ability, the three key proposed elements in this bill may just give them the support that they need to empower them to advocate for the rights of their children.

Thank you for your time and the opportunity to speak in favor of H-7221. I will close with, for all of the parents sitting here today, never let a broken system convince you that you have a broken child.

Respectfully submitted,
Crystal Rose Greene
Mom of four
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Communication Studies Department