



## Testimony regarding S194

February 9, 2016

Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to provide testimony to help inform you as you ponder the suspension and expulsion bill. My name is Karen Price and I am a Family Support Director at the Vermont Family Network. We are experienced parents of children with disabilities helping other parents of children with disabilities work through the vast array of concerns which come with parenting a child with a disability. We help families through our telephone helpline as well as through in person support. When a child exhibits behavior issues in school and faces a variety of disciplinary actions including restraints and seclusion and suspension/expulsion, it puts a terrible strain on the child and family. When a parent has to constantly pick up a child early or keep a child home because of repeated suspensions, their work situation is jeopardized. Few workplaces will tolerate an employee leaving the office frequently and abruptly or staying out for days.

For a child with a disability, behavior is often a form of communication or a manifestation of the disability. Simply put, the child sometimes has to be taught how to behave. From the families we talk to, we hear that children are often suspended for non-egregious behaviors such as work refusal, talking back, or being loud. One school district has labelled these behaviors as violent : a child flailing his arms and hitting someone who came behind him, a child motioning as if to stab with a pencil, but not actually attempting to hit anyone, kicking a principal, grabbing the glasses off an adult – these are children in third grade and younger.

Disturbingly, there is a category of students who end up in a “non-welcome” mode – a child who is not formally suspended but merely not welcome back into school. Without any formal status, these children are in educational limbo, receiving no services, and not counted in any data. We often see this with students approaching the age of 16, which is when that student can drop out and be lost forever. In the last school year, we had 39 children in the southern half of the state in the “non-welcome” category. Sometimes these students return to their schools, others might go to alternative educational settings, and some just never return.

What could be the result if schools had to explore supports that might be put in place to prevent or reverse maladaptive behaviors before considering suspension/expulsion? Supports could be provided in the form of Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS), which is a schoolwide behavior initiative to help teach all children about appropriate behavior. For children with disabilities, behavior support is in the form of a behavior plan, tailored towards the behaviors of that specific child. Behavior plans are crafted for children with a high degree of maladaptive behaviors and are based on a specific evaluation called a functional behavior assessment (FBA). FBAs look at why a child behaves “badly” and seeks to address the cause of the behavior, so that a positive behavior plan, using evidence-based strategies, can be developed.

I will share my own story with you. I am the parent of an 18 year old son with autism and an intellectual disability. He has significant motor and communication challenges. From preschool age, he exhibited a variety of behaviors – he would scream, roll around on the ground, grab people and clothing, refuse to do work and bolt. In his most spectacular bolting incident, he left the middle school, ran through the parking lot and down the road towards

Route 15. The Director of Special Education drove his car to retrieve him. I was distraught when I found out, although a friend reminded me how I never thought he'd even walk, let alone run fast enough to outrun his entire special education team. He had behaviors most students would have been suspended for. Yet – his special education teams, through four different schools, elementary through high school, worked to implement positive behavior plans. They did not suspend him. Through teaching and rewarding positive behaviors, which included building in strategies to help him communicate, we slowly turned the tide. He now skis with adaptive skiing volunteers, was able to successfully participate in our family vacations to Europe twice in the last three years, and is completely functional within school, home and the community.

My son is in the group of students with the highest needs behaviorally. If he had been suspended and not able to access behavior supports, he might be in a residential program now, completely excluded from the community.

Positive behavior plans can, and do, work. Across the state, we see too many children with disabilities suspended without any behavior supports in place. Some end up in alternative educational settings, separated from their peers. As a parent of a child with a disability who received the behavior services he needed, I would like to see others afforded the same services. Sadly, Vermont schools can suspend/expel children too easily, depriving students with disabilities of the benefits of education and the opportunity to reach their potential. I believe that whatever measures we can put in place to support schools in successfully supporting children with disabilities, behaviorally and academically, will result in better outcomes, both for our individual children and society as a whole.

Thank you.

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