

Hello Chair Sharpe and Members of the House Education Committee,

My name is Miriam Stoll. I am here with the Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council (VTDDC), on which I have served for 3 years. I am a school psychologist and for 20 years have worked in schools with students who struggle academically and emotionally. I also served on the Burlington School Board for 2 years, one of those as Chair of the Finance Committee.

Today, however, I am here primarily as a parent. My oldest daughter has Williams Syndrome, which is a neuro-developmental disability present at birth. Some of you may remember Eva as she spoke to this committee sharing her views of how important it is for private schools to accept students with disabilities. As you saw, Eva has an amazing gift of being able to express herself and speak from the heart. Yet, she has difficulty with many tasks -- academic and otherwise -- that the rest of us take for granted. Eva did not lift her head until she was 10 months old, did not smile or acknowledge others until she was close to a year and when she was 6 and ready to enter kindergarten she could not recognize a single letter, hold a fork or draw a circle. In 4th grade, on top of Williams Syndrome Eva battled cancer. But I am not here to focus on the hardships and challenges. Just the opposite, I am here to tell you how, despite many obstacles, Eva at 18 is a young woman who can read, text, understand and discuss current events, bake luscious desserts, and who does already and will continue to contribute to her community.

A critical factor in Eva's ability to learn and grow was her Individual Education Plan, which as is required by the IDEA, has provided her with FAPE -- a free and *appropriate* public education -- in the Least Restrictive Environment, which for her has been our local public schools. Due to her IEP Eva has had a variety of excellent supports -- Physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech and language services, intensive reading and writing interventions, alternative math programs, and para-educator support to help with social and adaptive skills. These supports were not "extras" but were pivotal to her ability to access her education and to learn.

Having lived the journey with Eva -- and having seen it every day in my work as a school psychologist I can attest that the way IEP supports are determined, planned and implemented is not perfect, certainly there is much room for improvement. I also am well aware that these supports are costly. But here's the thing...it is the mandate of public schools to serve *all* children, and for Eva and children with other types of disabilities this means providing an *Individualized* Education Plan -- not providing the minimum services or providing only a set dollar amount of services. It also means that children served by IEP's are treated equitably with other students, that their needs are not relegated to what money is "left over" after all others students' needs have been met.

My concern about this proposed spending plan is that it *drastically* reduces the resources available to serve our most vulnerable students -- those on IEP's (a subset

of whom research tells us also live below the poverty line. Early intervention is important and schools should provide more robust support to all children who struggle, whether or not they are or will at some point be eligible for an IEP. But to do this by directly taking away resources from children on IEP's without explicit, detailed plans as to how FAPE and LRE can be maintained is short-sighted, harsh, and likely illegal.

I have prepared a visual that I think will help you to see why this proposal is terrifying for parents of children who are served by IEPs. Using numbers provided in the Kolbe and Killeen report and data from the Vermont AOE, I have calculated the drop in average amount of State dollars allocated to supporting IEP's if this Bill goes into effect as currently presented. The drop is precipitous. The Average State dollars currently allocated to an IEP is just under \$14,000. But in 2020 that tumbles to just under \$4,000, and then is slowly reduced annually to about \$1900 in 2028. And the situation will be even more dire if inflation occurs and/or Federal funds for IEP's are reduced, both of which are likely. Here is the plain truth: Children like Eva with developmental disabilities, children who have experienced trauma, children with learning disabilities, these children will not go away...but as you can see by this graph, in this proposed plan the money to support them does.

I urge you to reconsider moving so quickly to introduce this new special education funding model, and if you do eventually move towards it, change the guidance that enables schools to put only 30% of their census based allocation toward IEP services. A better approach would be this year to put forth an implementation plan that will provide guidance and tangible supports to schools to increase the use of best practice methods for IEP services and to transition more effectively to an MTSS model. Help schools to reduce costs and improve outcomes without penalizing one group of students. As part of that effort consider making changes in some current regulations to enhance the flexibility in how funds are used, such as making it easier for Special Education staff to work with heterogeneous groups of students. Creation of an advisory panel of constituents, educators, and legislators to develop the plan would ensure that all voices are heard. And finally, please ensure that as these ideas are implemented children who qualify for and require IEP's continue to be provided with FAPE so that they can access their education and learn...just like everyone else.

Thank you very much for your time.

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Eva's mom
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