Written Testimonies in Support of S.233

Senate Health and Welfare Committee

An Act Relating to Establishing a Special Education Family Advocacy Pilot Program

The following written testimonies have been submitted by Vermont parents and professionals in support of S.233.

I. Parent Testimony

1. Parent of Two Children with Disabilities (Springfield, VT)

Testimony: "• What has been your experience navigating early intervention, special education, or related services in Vermont?
I have utilized the school district in Springfield Vermont for early education. My older daughter was diagnosed early and I thought this would be wonderful but she was falling through the cracks for most of her schooling. The teachers did not follow the IEP and she was given material that was not appropriate for her education. The communication was never well done. I think the teachers and staff are so understaffed and over worked they unfortunately did not have the ability to help her early on and throughout her educational journey.

When she was in high school she was in ODP. I think this could be a great program for some but because she was with kids with a learning delay much lower then hers she was not challenged or able to grow. When she went to college at Landmark we really saw much more hands on and communication not just with the teachers but with their students on how they learn. There is was catered to the student.

My son has dyslexia. In the school district they have had to hire out for tutoring because their special education department does not have the trained teacher to teach him properly. There is also a lack of communication from the teachers to the special education to the parents. IEP meetings are done and notes and the IEP takes months to be updated. When asking for a meeting or updates this can takes weeks. It is us as parents that really have to advocate and stay on everything because the special education department cannot.

The struggle with my son now is the communication and teaching styles of the tutor, special education and his teachers. They seem not to communicate and all teach him differently. This has made for poor test scores and him not going further in his learning. He is in 6th grade and reading at a 3rd grade level. I think also having more education on learning styles and having more communication on how to all work as a team to better help the child would be so beneficial. This would also help lesion plans. My son wants to read the same things as his piers but is unable to most of the time. I think having more staff and advocated for these children that need the support in literacy would only benefit the school and the child for their learning.

As for early education for younger students I have been told many times by patients that they have such a good experience until age of 3 with the parent child centers but then when the school takes over there the communication and support is not there.

• What challenges have families faced when trying to understand their rights, options, or the special education process?
In my experience as a parent I am offed a paper with my rights but we do not go over it. My rights are not discussed. I have not received anything with other supports to help me or my child to understand the process of the meeting and her education. I have also had to find the tutoring for my child for the school to use and reach out with them to try to schedule because the school has not done this in a timely manner. I have had to use legal aid in the past for help support a child education and advocates to help me along the way because the school has not or is not doing what they are suppose to be. This can be following the IEP, updating the IEP. I also think this comes down to the staff not being well educated on some special education, lack of experience and lack of staff and support.

• Where have you seen gaps in support for families—particularly during transitions or conflict? The transition from 3 years and up I find to be hard. The families coming from the parent child centers and having a wraparound support model to one that has less support. I also find as the child grows and changes schools. For Springfield there is 4 schools in the district that children have to change. This can be a big struggle on having the right support for the children in the classrooms and with the changes of teachers. All of the teachers teach differently and this can also affect the learning and supports of the special education piece.

• How might access to a knowledgeable, neutral family advocate have changed outcomes for a child or family?
I think the more support we can give families the better as their child learns. I have felt that having that advocate that can listen and help support in meetings, on the phone and really able to help you and the child advocate for them was beneficial. I also find that it is hard to have this. The school has never told me about a advocate. I found this out on my own with my own research.

• Why do you believe Vermont would benefit from piloting a state-sponsored special education family advocacy program?
The more support we can give children from the early stages of life to the later years is the best outcome for them. Someone who is there to advocate for their education and knows the rules and regulations. The parents are involved but it is hard with the emotions you go through because it is your child. I think the frustrations and the want for your child just to have the education that he or she deserves. I also think an advocate understands that not all children learn the same way. Each child is different and deserves an education just as one that might not need any supports. The more help we can give our children early the more we can support them in their growth and next steps in life.”

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2. Parent of Multiple Children with Disabilities (Mount Holly)

Testimony: “I am a parent of more than one child with limitations. Assistance with navigating the education system is crucial to ensure your children get the most out of their education. We have state funded ‘Community Assistants’ to assist people with navigating their health insurance needs; are children’s education MORE or LESS important than health insurance coverage?? If we truly mean the ‘No child left Behind…’ mantra then education/guiding parents and children through their education must be funded, encouraged and emphasized.”

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3. Parent Who Relocated to Vermont (Springfield, VT)

Testimony: “Since moving to Vermont from another state my child’s iep has changed drastically because of the lack of support in the iep department. She has been receiving all services that are listed on her iep and also due to the lack of support the school keeps dropping her hours of service and slowly do away with it . My child’s teacher was over whelmed having to try to support 9 children with iep and also teach class last year this year the school is secretive about it because a lot of parents have reported the school to the board of education. Since my child’s teacher was dignose at age of three and since four years old apart of the school iep program they have never provided proper services a medical doctor had said my child’s teacher would need . And due to the lack of services and a little safety risk I’m scared that when my youngest child who has a severe medical issue won’t be safe at school and the same thing happen all over again. This program really needs to be redone and these students deserve support in all of there needs and para support is one the biggest issues along with just the lack of support and I feel the school is trying there best. I hope by the time my youngest is old enough it will be better and I’ll feel safe sending my child to school.”

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4. Parent with Two Children with Disabilities (Clarendon, VT)

Testimony: “Good afternoon, my name is Kaitelynd Palmer. I am a mom of three school aged children, and two of my children have IEPs. I am writing today in strong support of S.233.

For me, this bill is not theoretical. It is personal.

I fought for nearly two years to get my youngest son who will be 8 this year the support he needed. During that time, we experienced an incident where he eloped from school and was gone for nearly two hours before being found. There were many other clear indications that he has special needs, yet the initial school evaluation yielded no qualifying results.

In kindergarten, things escalated quickly. Following a full evaluation at Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center's Childhood Development program, he was placed in a therapeutic classroom by January of his kindergarten year. It took an outside medical evaluation, not at the recommendation or support of the school but rather on my own, for the severity of his needs to be fully recognized.

First grade continued to be incredibly difficult. Despite having an IEP in place, he was repeatedly removed from regular classroom activities. His education was disrupted, and it often felt like the plan designed to support him was not consistently being honored.

Now in second grade, we are still fighting. Just this year alone, we have had four IEP meetings regarding his placement and the appropriate implementation of his IEP.

The emotional toll of constantly advocating, preparing for meetings, documenting concerns, and trying to ensure consistency is overwhelming. No parent should have to become an expert in special education law simply to ensure their child is safe, supported, and learning.

The only reason I was able to navigate this system at all is because of my sister, Alexis Palmer, the author of this bill. She has dedicated countless hours helping me navigate the process: sitting in meetings, answering frantic phone calls, and being there through tears and frustration. She is also a mother of a child who requires services herself. She understands how complex and exhausting the system can be.

Without her guidance and advocacy, I truly believe my son would not be receiving the services he needs to make it through each day.

But not every parent has someone like that in their corner.

S.233 would provide families access to knowledgeable, neutral advocates so parents are not alone in these rooms. It would help ensure that IEPs are understood, implemented appropriately, and revisited when necessary. It would strengthen collaboration instead of forcing families into constant conflict.

This bill is about safety.
It is about dignity.
It is about equity for families who do not have professional knowledge or built-in support systems.

I urge you to support S.233 so that other parents do not have to fight for years just to have their child’s needs recognized and met.

Thank you for your time.”

II. Professional & Parent-Provider Testimony

5. Family Support Service Provider (Windsor County)

Testimony: “In my work with families, I have experienced many times where parents/caregivers were confused and overwhelmed by the IEP process. They have wanted to support their child and advocate for them, but weren't sure how to proceed. The process can be confusing, especially for people not familiar with the clinical language which is often used by providers and educators. In one particular case, a mom I work with was unsure what services her child was legally entitled to at school and she wanted more information on how she could further support her child at home. An advocate could bridge the gap between providers, educators, and families and help parents and caregivers better support their child. This bill is an equity issue, since families who are financially secure have the resources to navigate the complexities of the system. Everyone deserves the opportunity to be informed and to better support their child.”

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6. Parent and Service Provider with 30 Years’ Experience (Perkinsville, VT)

Testimony: “I am both a parent of children with disabilities and a service provider for children and families with developmental delays. I consider myself an educated person who has worked in human services and early special education for almost 30 years. As my children have moved from early intervention to early childhood special education to elementary and high school special education, I can find even myself overwhelmed with the number of meetings, forms to fill out, evaluation reports to decipher (in what at times feel like it’s written in a foreign language with all the technical jargon). Well-meaning specialist talk quickly assuming everyone understands what is being said as a parent you are attempting to keep up and understand 30 pages of all the things your child is not able to successfully accomplish. Parents struggle to understand their rights (which again are written in technical jargon with enough pages to fill a good sized binder.) Parents are often overwhelmed and rarely truly understand exactly what their children are entitled to or how to solve disputes when their rights are not being upheld. Emotions can run high for families and school personnel. An impartial advocate can help bridge the divide and support the family and school to truly work as a team to support the student/ family while protecting their rights.”

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7. Parent/ Caregiver Coaching Service Provider (Londonderry, VT)

Testimony: “In my professional experience I have witnessed several parents attending special education meetings for their child(ren) who become lost in the conversation because they don't understand the language or procedure. They often feel intimidated and/or manipulated into accepting services that are less than adequate. All families should be given the opportunity to have a special education family advocate throughout the IEP process. Advocates not only help the families feel empowered, better educated, and more comfortable with the process they also can help maintain a positive working relationship between parents and educators.”