

Round Table Discussion: Meeting the Highly Qualified Teacher Criteria for Special Education Teachers

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Location: SD430

Witness:

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Testimony

Introduction- Thank you to this Committee for the opportunity to participate in today's discussions as they relate to the new provisions included in the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and special education teacher requirements. I am the parent of a child with a disability. I am the parent of a child who, under the law, is entitled to the same quality of education as that of my non disabled children. Unfortunately, for my son, Patrick, and for many families of children with disabilities, there continues to be a gap in quality and quantity of special education teachers.

I. There are not enough skilled, knowledgeable, certified or available special education teachers to provide instruction to my son and others like him in our educational system. This past year, my son was taught by a highly qualified special education teacher for the first time in his school career, Patrick is sixteen. A key ingredient for learning and success in the classroom for my children has been the teacher. Patrick has had the good fortune to be taught by several dedicated, compassionate teachers, paraprofessionals and other school personnel. He has also experienced poorly trained, inadequately prepared, frustrated teachers who stayed in the classroom biding their time, until a better opportunity came along. The experience has been exhausting and frustrating for my family, and most of all for Patrick. The successes in learning for my son have come about when the teacher has possessed sufficient knowledge and skill regarding the needs of children with disabilities. The successes have occurred most often when the teachers' disposition was one of understanding, openness and a willingness to work with my family. The successes have occurred most often when a balance was struck between knowledge of the content, the skills to work with the particular disability and a willingness, on the part of the teacher, to partner with others and myself to support the process of learning for Patrick.

II. Historically, as a consumer, I the parent assumed that the teacher providing instruction to my child was specifically trained and had knowledge in the content area and had experience working with students with disabilities. I as the consumer trusted that these teachers were qualified to teach not just the subject but the child. What I discovered is that no parent can assume, and that we all need to learn what questions to ask. What I discovered is that the teachers wanted to teach, wanted to see learning successes for my son, but did not have adequate training or support to do this. In an attempt to support those teachers willing to teach my son, I realized that the expertise needed to come from somewhere else. Out of frustration, to find a qualified teacher to teach my son, I developed a Center for Autism and Related Disabilities and brought those personnel into the school setting through the IEP process. Out of frustration, I developed in partnership

with the nearby University, an Institute for Exceptional Education, a training and information center to support preservice teachers, teachers in the community and families. Out of frustration and fear, I returned to higher education to complete a doctoral degree in exceptional education in order to navigate through the high school experience with my son. I will graduate this spring. He will start high school this fall.

III. When the high school principle says to me, “next year your son will have a highly qualified special education teacher”, if we can find one, I, as many other parents ask, what does that mean. Does that mean that the teacher has been able to pass a State test and therefore be ready to teach my child? Does highly qualified special education teacher mean that the individual has been prepared to instruct in a specific content area for elementary, middle and secondary level? Does that mean that the individual has been prepared to teach students with disabilities, has knowledge of the specific content area, and can pass a State test? As a parent, I want an adequately prepared, qualified, teacher for my son. I believe that a special education teacher must possess specific knowledge and demonstrate certain skills in order to teach my son. This same teacher must also be able to teach my son geography, science and math. It is important that we not sacrifice the special education qualifications for skill in the content area. There is a risk of losing the balance between the special educators unique set of qualifications and the need for content knowledge if we allow one to supersede the other.

Recommendation: My son has remained in middle school for two extra years because the local high school has been slow to meet the mandates of the law, and to hire qualified special education teachers. The shortage of personnel in our area is extreme. My son needs teachers that are capable of preparing him for life after high school, for employment, for further education. Federal mandates such as IDEA, HEA, and NCLB must continue to put pressure on our education system to invest in training on the preservice level, to support faculty in higher education to prepare our teachers and continue to give leverage to families such as myself, to challenge the system from within. The state and local education agencies must provide clearer, more concise information so that families will know to ask the question, ‘is my child’s teacher qualified’.