

Good morning. Thank you very much for allowing us this opportunity to present at the Special Education Commission Hearings. It is my honor to share a small piece of our journey with you today. Our journey has been one of trials/tribulations and joys/successes. We have pioneered on and paved the way gentler for those parents and children with intellectual disabilities that have followed.

My name is Nicki Habecker and this is my son Joshua Habecker. We are here to tell you that you don't know what you don't know and when you know better you do better as a parent and a professional. Joshua is 14 years old and has been receiving services officially since he was 1 through Infant and Toddler programs and services provided by Easter Seals and Early Intervention Services 3-5 program through the Intermediate Unit. These services were so important for Joshua. My husband and I knew very little about having a child with complex needs. These professionals were my son's and our earliest teachers. Their support, knowledge and training were invaluable.

Then it became time to transition into elementary school. When it was time to transition into Kindergarten within our school district, we were encouraged to wait one more year. There was not a class within our district that could meet his needs; he would be bussed to a nearby school district. If we waited one more year, and he remained in the intermediate unit segregated classroom attending 5 days a week, there would be a classroom the next year. We opted to wait. (You don't know what you don't know). Joshua started Kindergarten. He was placed primarily in a Basic Living Skills Classroom within his "home" district with some inclusive opportunities with typical peers. There were numerous opportunities to improve upon that transition. One example that needed improvement or continuity was that Joshua had been utilizing a notebook picture exchange communication system to communicate. He also had a small 4 pec picture communication device. I am certain that form of communication was not carried over into his elementary school's classroom. This carryover was critical because he used very few American sign language signs, limited verbal vocabulary, however, he understood a great deal of information. There were many gaps or areas of improvement that would have made the transition smoother. In my experience with other families and teachers, there has been some improvement, but still much effort is needed to provide continuity and a smooth transition. Ideally, those children, caregivers, teachers and specialists would have an opportunity to all meet, share information and develop a plan for successful transition and inclusion prior to the beginning of Kindergarten. We did experience the joy of having a caring teacher and aides in the classroom. I believe they would encourage this collaboration to enhance the child's successful transition.

From Kindergarten to 7th grade we have had quite the journey of disappointments, trials and frustrations. However, at the end of the day as a parent I always try to keep Joshua's best interests in mind and remember it truly is about him. I also believe that the majority of teachers and school professionals truly do want to "make a difference" and educate all children. Therein, lies our common goal and ground. This common vision is crucial in the development and mind set of an IEP team. I must tell you that there are those that appear to be exceptions-incredibly frustrating, but I have found that the exceptions seem to stem from something a little deeper. This epiphany changed the way I look at our team and how I began to approach the challenges of our team. About the climax of my frustration with our IEP team and right before my epiphany, I interviewed for a position with the Include Me program, The Arc of PA. I learned so much in this position that enabled me to help others, but also help

my own son and our team. I began to learn some of what I and others did not know. It turns out that we all wish there were a manual to guide us. Many of the professionals, including specialists in the school system, have not had the extensive training needed to meet the needs of more complex students and often have much to learn. Over the last 3 years I have been able to advocate for my son and work collaboratively with our team to bring in knowledge, training, supports, etc... to benefit our team. Most professionals have been receptive. There have been those exceptions. I encourage everyone to dig a little deeper to discover the barriers of inclusion. I have experienced many aspects from I don't have the resources, including time, training, materials to that child takes away from my others students learning. In my experience with knowledge, support, training and yes sometimes administration involvement, everyone can keep the common goal in mind-education of the child and overcome the barriers to inclusion.

Over the last 3 years our team has experienced incredible joys and successes. This year-7th grade we are truly working as a team. Joshua is included with his peers in language arts, sciences and geography. We are utilizing the Stepwise process to enable him to actively and meaningfully participate in the classroom and with the curriculum. We use an ipad to assist with communication needs and academic needs. It is so exciting how far we have come since 1972 and in his educational journey. Why is it important? Every child deserves to have a free and appropriate education. Who truly knows what one is capable of learning, we must err on the premise of capability. Beyond that, we create a better classroom and school community when we value all of our children. This transcends into the community and ultimately creates "better" citizens. It fosters acceptance and purpose for all. Anytime I am in the community an adult or peer warmly greets my son. They know his name, they know his smile. They see him as a person of value. This comes from inclusion. We are teaching great life long lessons.

Some key point areas that Special Education Funding has helped our team to be successful:

- *Supplementary Aids and Services Toolkit is an incredibly beneficial tool for a team to prepare for an IEP.

- *Assistive Technology is important to assisting a child be successfully included. Utilize the Intermediate Unit for a consultation to identifying and implementing the AT that can aide a child in successful inclusion. Utilize the SETT Model, FEET Model or WATI. There needs to be a plan to identify, implement, collect data, reflect and reevaluate the needs and successes. Utilize the loan program from PATTAN for communication devices. Train the team, including the parents and child. Utilize the "best fit" assistive technology. One size does not fit all.

- *Behavioral Supports and Services. Utilize the guidance counselor or professionals at the Intermediate Unit to provide a consultation, observation, meet as a team to develop a plan, train team with successful strategies, implement, collect data and reflect. Tweak as needed.

- *Make certain that a holistic approach is utilized across all environments and situations. Continuity and consistency is very important with children with complex needs to be successful.

*Ask you specialists i.e., physical therapist, occupational therapist, guidance counselor to observe a child in all the environments. Utilize their experience, knowledge to help identify and implement needed supplementary aids and services. Ex. Table height and a chair that enables a child's feet to be on the floor at 90 degrees. Adequate seating is helpful to a child enabling them to write, read, for balance, stability and main tain attention for a longer time period. Adding dycem may help a child not slide. The location of a child's desk and locker is critical when they are utilizing a wheelchair or walker for mobility.

*Collaboration and planning time for teachers and with parents is necessary.

*Utilize the Stepwise Process and the Universal Design for learning methods when including children with complex needs.

*Ensure there are best practices for those in specialized classrooms and appropriate curriculum/materials.

*Continue parent trainings within districts. Parents need to have knowledge, support and resources.

To sit at the table and be a contributing member of the IEP team/system a parent needs the following:

1. Knowledge of the process/system-alleviates anxiety, feeling over whelmed, or feeling "railroaded."
2. Knowledge of your child's rights and resources to obtain those rights if needed
3. Support and strength of like-minded parents and professionals
4. Trained and knowledgeable staff/teachers/supervisors
5. Support of top administration/board
6. Willingness to work collaboratively for the best interests of the child.

I would like to leave you with a question to ponder. I have worked very hard advocating for me child. It has stretched me tremendously. My team has worked very hard to meet my son's educational needs and have also learned and grown. What about the children that do not have the same voice? What about the caregiver that does not advocate for their child, remember "you don't know what you don't know?" Children in my son's school, district or state should all have the same opportunities for a free and appropriate education; not just the more knowledgeable parent or the "squeaky wheel." All of these practices are only possible when Special Education is funded adequately and equitably through the state, not just pockets or to those that "squeak."

Thank you for your time and continued efforts for all of our children. As a parent and professional I applaud each of you with your continued dedication.