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Testimony for Funding Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education Services

Hearing on March 29, 2021 in Ways and means for SB 513

We are a family of four in Columbia County. My oldest daughter started attending the ECSE preschool immediately after she turned 3. At that time her IFSP fell under developmental delay. For the first 3 years of her life, we had fought to find services for her. We were met with year long wait lists and no answers or assistance from the providers we did see. She had delays in social/emotional communications and could not function in a typical preschool environment. During her second year in ECSE her skills really started to develop. The ECSE team worked with us to create plans and visuals that were best for her. She began to participate in routines and developed coping skills when the demands became too much.

Earlier this year, I asked for an Autism Spectrum Disorder evaluation for her. Through many evaluations and observations at both home and her classroom, she received eligibility for ASD Services through the ESD. We had a team of specialists working together to determine her eligibility. This team was also there to provide reassurance and support to our family as we were also working through a medical ASD diagnosis. Knowing that her ASD eligibility will stay with her when she started Kindergarten in September brought me some peace of mind.

The skills she has learned in her ECSE classroom have transferred to home and the community. She now has the ability to recognize when she is over stimulated and can find coping skills to assist herself. She has gained some social skills and she is learning how to express herself and her needs. Living in a rural community makes having access to quality early education difficult. We fall just above the cut off for income eligibility into head start and as a single income family, we do not have the funds to enroll her into a private preschool. The ECSE program has been essential in introducing her to learning, in a positive, supportive environment.

When my youngest daughter was 16 months old, her pediatrician referred her for Early Intervention Services. After receiving her evaluation, she was enrolled in the Early Intervention program to receive speech therapy. Her Specialist is also my oldest daughter's ECSE teacher. The team approach to working with our children and our family has been so beneficial. We have been able to develop trusting relationships that support our whole family. Access to early intervention is essential to our family, being a public employee with a \$1,600 per person deductible for medical insurance makes affording private speech therapy near impossible. Having two children with special needs amplifies the financial burden placed on our family. We are so thankful for the team of providers working with our family and the opportunity for our children to receive the services they require to be their best selves.

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