

Submitter: Margaux Lemma
On Behalf Of: Lincoln
Committee: House Committee On Education
Measure, Appointment or Topic: HB2448

I am speaking on behalf of my son and numerous others like him who cannot speak for themselves. Lincoln has down syndrome and is emerging verbally, but is still working on pronunciation. He's in 1st grade. He requires a full-time PARA and numerous in classroom supports in order for him to experience what he is legally entitled to thanks to the IDEA free appropriate public education according to the unique needs of the child as described in the child's IEP.

We attend Markham Elementary school in PPS and see first hand the benefits of supporting kids like Lincoln, their teachers, therapists and faculty.

We see first hand the results of the lack of funds: not all kids receive the same level of support, for many reasons. Almost all reasons are a direct result of the most obvious one: lack of funds.

It is because of the lack of funds, that administration pushes kids to be in classrooms like the ISC that we were told during our first IEP meetings that is what is best for Lincoln. Even though there is zero data to support starting off kids with disabilities in segregated classrooms. All the research shows kids with disabilities and their peers benefit from inclusive classrooms - as long as they have support.

It is because of lack of funds that Lincoln's first months in Kindergarten started with 1 PARA for 3 kids with IEPs, that when tallied they needed support far more than 100% of the day. An impossible task for one.

It is because of lack of funds that teachers, faculty, PARAs and more are not provided the proper training our children deserve and their peers deserve so they can be in an inclusive setting.

It is because of lack of funds that school environments are not truly inclusive - which can create a culture deterrent to kids with disabilities such as what we found at Maplewood Elementary.

It is because of lack of funds that we donated a potty stool for Lincoln and others like him who needed a special step stool with handles to properly use the toilet.

It is because of lack of funds that most kids aren't as lucky as Lincoln, their families can't hire a lawyer like we could to advocate for their child and educate the staff, fight for the IDEA act to be upheld.

It is because of lack of funds that the IDEA act is continuously being ignored by administration, school boards, principals and even sped staff. As per IDEA section 1412 (a) (5) concerning Least Restrictive Environment:

"separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily."

With the use of supplementary aids and services...

The reason why segregated classes exist is because of a lack of supplementary aids and services available for each child. Schools are stretched thin. It's a lot more cost effective to group them together.

And certainly, there are kids with disabilities who do thrive in the segregated classroom - but many don't. And many we will never know if they can be fully integrated thanks to lack of funds.

We know thanks to our community at Markham Elementary that with the necessary supports that we have advocate for fiercely, that Lincoln thrives in the General Ed setting. All of his supports including a PARA we advocate for with the support of a lawyer. Why did we have to advocate in this extreme? Because of lack of funds. Lack of funds to educate PPS reps and Markham on how to properly support a kid like Lincoln. Lack of funds to properly staff the necessary number of PARAs in his classroom and the tremendous effort Dr Principal Brown Warren's had to give as a result to get kids like Lincoln what they need. Lack of funds to provide special reading support that he needs desperately.

The time has come, please, we beg you, support our children.