

Dear Chair and Committee Members:

Consistent access to Early Intervention and Special Education changes lives. Please allow me to tell you why.

In 1995, I and others provided caregiving support to a man in his fifties with a speech impediment that made understanding his communication difficult. He spoke mostly with vowels, with a few consonants mixed in, and always with a good attitude. At the time, I didn't know about available resources, nor whether or not they were accessible to him. I have wondered how much easier his life could have been if his speech were more intelligible to others. Did he have anyone who worked with him when he was younger? Would his opportunities have been better?

In the early 2000s, a family moved into our neighborhood. At the time, they had young children, one of who would later be diagnosed with autism. His mother, who was a teacher, worked with him, as did Early Intervention. Because of their efforts, he was able to communicate using some simple sign language. However, when he became elementary school age, it became apparent that the staff wasn't equipped to handle his needs, and he was transferred out of his neighborhood school. The new setting proved to be even worse, as the lack of adequate supervision there ended with him in the ICU. Physically, he recovered, but I wonder what would have been different for him now as a young adult if he had consistent resources during his school career. Would he have maintained the progress he had made?

In 2004, my oldest son was born. Interestingly enough, when he began to talk, his speech was incredibly similar to that of the man I had helped in 1995. Recognizing this pattern I spoke to his physician, private speech pathologists, and to anyone that could help. It would be a year before he would finally receive the services he needed which would continue into his early elementary years. Now, as a young man, no one can tell that he once lacked the ability to communicate clearly. However, I wonder why we had to fight for so long to get him help. Would he have needed less assistance if we could have intervened earlier?

In 2022, my youngest son was born. He was diagnosed with two conditions that cause developmental delays. Physical therapy has helped him learn how to move, feeding therapy has helped him learn how to eat, and occupational therapy has helped him with how to play. With the help of early intervention and speech therapy, he is learning social skills as well as how to talk. These are all skills that many of us take for granted, and ones in which he has made phenomenal progress towards independence. I don't want to wonder what his future would look like if he were to lose those services.

Chairperson and Committee, I am asking you to please not leave us or anyone else to wonder "What If". Many of these children are at a crucial point in their development in which Early Intervention and Special Education Services make a dramatic difference to their future outcomes. When our children, including the most vulnerable benefit, we all benefit. Now is our time in which we can help.

