



DATE: October 21, 2015

TO: Members of the Joint Committee on Higher Education

FROM: Julie Messina, President of the 3-21 Foundation, Government Affairs Committee Member of the Massachusetts Down Syndrome Congress, and parent of a student with Down syndrome

Re: *H.1064/S.672 An Act Creating Higher Education Opportunities for Students with Intellectual Disabilities, Autism Spectrum Disorders, and other Developmental Disabilities*

The 3-21 Foundation is a Massachusetts-based non-profit committed to advancing innovations in education and cognition for people with Down syndrome. We serve as the triangular link between Down syndrome education research, home and school, bringing the fruits of research into practice. Through our education programs such as the Learning Program, we work with families, researchers, clinicians and educators to understand the cognitive profile and develop effective teaching strategies for students with Down syndrome. In Massachusetts we deliver direct educational support to about 100 families. Together with our affiliate partner, the Down Syndrome Foundation (Orange County, CA) we serve approximately 700 families in Learning Programs across 20+ locations nation-wide. Additionally, I serve as a member of the Government Affairs Committee of the Massachusetts Down Syndrome Congress (MDSC). The MDSC is a non-profit organization established in 1983 to represent the voices of the 5,000+ people with Down syndrome living in the Commonwealth.

Both the 3-21 Foundation and the MDSC are organizations aligned in their goal to promote best practices in inclusive education for students with Down syndrome. We strongly support *H.1064/S.672 An Act Creating Higher Education Opportunities for Students with Intellectual Disabilities, Autism Spectrum Disorders, and other Developmental Disabilities*, because we believe this legislation will have significant, positive, educational and social impact on the members of our community. Research informs us that students with Down syndrome are globally more successful as adults when they are educated alongside their non-disabled peers. This statistic supports the importance of inclusive transition programs.

I have a 10-year old son, Evan and a 9-year old daughter, Michaela. Evan also happens to have Down syndrome. Both Evan and Michaela are 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders respectively in our neighborhood elementary school in Cambridge. Though Evan receives a significant number of special education services, he has always been educated in a general education setting with his non-disabled peers. The opportunity to be educated alongside peers, both with and without disabilities, in the same classroom working on assignments and projects together, has allowed him to develop age-appropriate skills, just like his peers. These are skills he would not necessarily have developed in an isolated special education classroom without opportunities for inclusion. His relationships at school with peers, both with and without disabilities, transcend classroom walls into the broader community. These skills have enabled him to participate in social/recreational activities throughout Cambridge.

As a result, Evan is not only a part of his school community, but very much a part of our larger, local youth community. This sense of belonging is critically important: because he belongs, he is engaged in learning, and that is why he is thriving. We don't know what the future holds, but inclusive education in middle school and high school in Cambridge are real options for our son today. We are however, not as assured of Evan's post-secondary options in inclusive education. This is a dilemma faced by every Massachusetts parent of a child with an intellectual and developmental disability (IDD), whether they have Down syndrome, autism spectrum disorder or some other condition.

I have hopes that my daughter will attend college. Her opportunity to do so is not something I would even think to question, but for my son, even just a few years ago, this was not an option. The 2007 discretionary grant that launched the Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment (ICE) initiative has created new opportunities for a small percentage of youth with IDD, however under our current educational system, the vast majority of students with IDD are provided no further opportunities to access learning once they leave high school. Through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), students with IDD are entitled to receive a free and appropriate education until age 22. However youth between the ages of 18-22 are often limited to segregated special education transition programs, housed within high school buildings, while an increasing number of their non-disabled peers are heading off to college campuses. We have worked hard to have Evan in the general education setting because special education without opportunities for inclusion isolates students from their community.

College is not necessarily just about the academics. The college experience is also about learning how to learn and navigate the world independently. These are skills that are essential for integrated competitive employment. These skills are difficult to learn in a segregated high school transition program. The current higher education and employment outlook for individuals with IDD is grim. Only one-fifth move on from high-school to any post-secondary education at an institute of higher education. The majority do not enter the workforce at all, but stay in facility-based or non-work settings, dependent on the Commonwealth for support. For those that do find jobs, most are underemployed; they are not working full-time, making less than minimum wage or both. College attendance correlates to greater employment and higher wages. Given the opportunity and support, students with IDD who receive transition services in college with their non-disabled peers will more likely to do better in life, often becoming independent, contributing members of their communities. The ICE initiative has demonstrated this.

In just a few years when Evan turns 14 we will begin transition planning. I want him to have the right to access a transition program that will help him achieve his fullest potential. It will be important for him to have choices as he and his education team develop a transition program to fit his individual needs. These choices must include an option for inclusive higher education as that is the setting he has known and thrived in. It may not be the right option for all youth with IDD but many, perhaps even most, could benefit from this opportunity. We need comprehensive legislation to ensure this opportunity for all because the research supporting this is so compelling.

Today, the possibility of an inclusive college experience is a very real option for Evan. I am here speaking not only for my son but for the entire Learning Program and MDSC communities when I state that I want this option to be more than just a possibility. I want this option to be a certainty for Evan, as well as for other youth with IDD. Your favorable vote on this bill will make this a certainty. On behalf of both organizations and the families and students we serve, thank you for investing in the future of the Commonwealth's otherwise most vulnerable citizens.

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