

Dear Chairman Richardson and Committee Members,

Our family lives in Champlin and we have two children with special needs. Prior to COVID-19, our older son attended 4th grade at a small charter school in Champlin and our younger son attended 1st grade at our public school in the Anoka Hennepin district. Each child has a detailed IEP as they each have complex needs. When schools first closed last March, within approximately 24 hours, they lost every support that we've spent years developing. Their schools closed, their occupational therapy clinic closed, their behavioral therapy clinics closed, and the pool that is vital to meeting their sensory needs closed. Amongst other diagnoses, both of my children are on the autism spectrum, which is already a very underserved population. We've spent years on waiting lists waiting to access the support that they desperately need, as research continuously shows that early intervention is the most effective. To have all of their supports crumble at the same time was heartbreaking beyond words!

Both the public school and the charter school struggled to navigate distance learning and they offered our family a list of independent activities that we could do at home. Both my husband and I work full time, so we did not have the materials, training, or prep time to instantly become a teacher, special education teacher, behavior therapist, speech therapist, social skills instructor, speech therapist, etc. overnight. We are fortunate to have basic school supplies, but did not have a curriculum, manipulatives, textbooks, or any of the hands on/tactile materials that our children need to learn. Other than the list of activities that we could choose to prepare and conduct at home, there were no supports (virtually, in person, or otherwise) offered and the IEPs essentially felt like they didn't exist. They were not offered social skills groups, speech therapy, etc. on a virtual basis until more recently, so they went many months without support from a trained professional.

Due to my own health issues, our children have continued with distance learning. Both of our children now attend the charter school because navigating distance learning at two different schools was impossible. Despite our best efforts, both children have regressed educationally, emotionally, and socially. Although their teachers are caring and kind, our opinion is that distance learning students are essentially invisible. The dedicated teachers are exhausted by trying to keep up with the needs of kids in school and do not have the time or resources to support children via distance learning, especially children with special needs who cannot participate virtually without full 1:1 support. The only saving grace for our family was the extensive support of our extended family. My parents were able to stop working and help us full time, and my sister cut her hours to work on a part time basis so that they could all provide support for distance learning.

I am willing to share more details of the extensive toll this past year has taken on our family if you'd like more information. We are begging for more funding and support to the schools to help them support families like ours attempt to recover some of the educational opportunities that have been lost. Please vote to support the Special Education Recovery Bill, HF 965.

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