



July 23, 2020

Dear Legislators,

I am writing on behalf of the Multicultural Autism Action Network to express concerns with how decisions are being made about the upcoming school year. We are concerned that families of children with disabilities, and especially families of children with disabilities from multicultural communities, are not being heard. At a time when many organizations and agencies are prioritizing the achievement gap, we feel that it is not acceptable to leave the communities most at risk of harm out of the conversation.

We would like to bring a few things to your attention:

MDE has conducted online surveys and focus groups about returning to school in the fall, however, it is not clear what efforts have been made to reach out to communities of color or disability communities. Representatives of our organization participated in one of these calls, and there was only one person of color on our call who found out about the phone call through another advocacy organization. They were not invited. In that meeting several advocates made it clear that online surveys are not accessible to many of the key constituencies most at risk of harm. We suggested hiring people from those communities to do phone calls, conference calls, focus groups, to go to those communities instead expecting the communities to go to MDE. But it is unclear whether any of that work was done.

We shared the results of an informal survey in which we asked families to rate their student's distance learning experiences:

- Parents of children with disabilities in general rated their distance learning experience at a 3 on a scale of 1-10.
- Parents of children with disabilities in immigrant communities rated their experience at a 2.

We shared that many families of children with disabilities felt like they were placed in an adversarial position with their schools. Many expressed that the "individual" part of IEPs appeared to have been left out of the conversation. Others expressed the idea that Individualized Education Plans became de facto Individual Family Support Plans as families were expected to take on additional responsibilities, but left out the family part. There is a sense that many schools simply came with the mindset of "this is what we are doing" rather than asking the question, "what will work for you?"

We shared that distance learning shifted a lot of responsibility from the school to the family, but many assumptions were made about the time, space, and resources families had available. Families of privilege with ready access to wifi, devices, space to work, a parent with free time and resources to teach, were best positioned to succeed in distance learning. Those who did not have access to these things were left behind.

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We also heard concerns about how the needs of immunocompromised children, or children with immunocompromised family members are going to be met when students return to school. Are there accommodations being made for these families? What plans are being made for students that are unable to wear a mask or may not understand social distancing?

We are also concerned that the policies implemented during distance learning also disproportionately affect disabled parents. Assumptions were made about parent abilities and parent executive function skills. Children of parents with disabilities should not be penalized by a lack of accessibility.

We are beginning to see documentation that distance learning resulted in widening achievement gaps over the past several months, and there is a considerable amount of work that needs to be done to make up for lost gains. Even as the state continues to reopen, heading back to school may not be the reality for many in the disability community. As we contemplate how we move forward in shaping an uncertain future in education, it is imperative that accessibility is at the front of those conversations. A one-size-fits-all solution clearly will not work, but it is worth bearing in mind that no one has ever been harmed by increased accessibility.

We recognize that state leadership and policy makers were forced to make quick decisions, and were forced to think in the short term out of necessity. But now that we have had the benefit of some time and a little bit of space for more long term thinking, we need to make sure that we are centering on those most harmed by short-term decisions. We have no doubt that the policies implemented came from a place of good intentions, but we also recognize that good intentions are no substitute for an actual diversity of experience.

There is a saying in the disability that when you are not offered a seat at the table you simply bring your own chair. The state of Minnesota needs to do better. We should not have to bring our own chair.

Sincerely,

Multicultural Autism Action Network

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