

SB 2269
House Education Committee
Rep. Mark Owens, Chairman
3.17.21

Chairman Owen and Members of the Committee:

I am here today to ask for a “do pass” on SB 2269. The bill creates a partnership between our public schools and our post-secondary institutions to assist young adults with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities to forge a robust transition plan, which includes access to college.

While I serve as the executive director for Designer Genes of North Dakota, a Down syndrome association, I am here today to speak to you as parent of a young adult who lives with Down syndrome and who is currently attending college and has been since 2018. When she was born in 1999, there were few resources to support individuals with cognitive disabilities to attend college. Today, there are 301 colleges who identify as having supports for students with intellectual disability. (<https://thinkcollege.net/college-search>).

For decades, individuals with intellectual disabilities were raised and remained living in institutions. This led to severe deprivation in the areas of learning, exposure to real life experiences, and social interactions. The general society was also deprived of living and learning from individuals with intellectual disabilities as well. These two truths led to a number of societal myths that exist today. These myths impact the expectations that we have and continue to limit the experiences that are open to individuals with intellectual disabilities. I raise this point because my daughter has challenged the myths and biases that I have myself about what she can do in her life. Mostly, her response is “I’ve got this mom”. Debunking another myth, today people with Down syndrome are going to college. In fact, the Ruby’s Rainbow scholarship program has awarded scholarships to 306 individuals with Down syndrome since 2012. (<https://rubysrainbow.org/wp-content/uploads/Rubys-Impact-Report-2019.pdf>).

Investments in prevention and mitigation are critical for you to consider. My belief is that every inclusive experience that Elizabeth has been involved in has minimized the footprint and cost of public supports that she might have needed without those experiences. Her college experience is most certainly one of the most robust opportunities that she has had. She has to independently juggle her schedule, find her way to the Beaver Hockey games, responsibly handle her money, keep track of her “stuff”, negotiate friendships and relationships, and hold down an employment experience. She is learning how to prioritize the homework and assignments as well as to advocate for the needed supports in the classes that can help her stay successful.

Why are we making this investment in time and money for Elizabeth to go to college?

Bottomline is we want her to have the best possible chance of finding work that she loves and that will sustain her well-rehearsed ability to order every meal through DoorDash! Seriously, her vision for herself is to live an independent life and we see this as an investment in moving the needle on quality. We hope that she can break down the glass ceiling of poverty that so many with intellectual disabilities have been forced to live beneath. From data collected by Think College, “most students enrolled in supportive college programs, who exited (n = 290; 75%) either had a paid job (at exit or within 90 days), were participating in unpaid career development activities, had transferred to another postsecondary education program, or were doing a combination of these activities at exit.” (<https://thinkcollege.net/resource/program-evaluation-student-outcomes/annual-report-of-the-tpsid-model-demonstration-projects>). We are more interested in these statistics, than the statistics from the National Snapshot of Adults with Intellectual Disabilities in the Labor Force (<https://www.specialolympics.org/our-work/research/national-snapshot-of-adults-with-intellectual-disabilities-in-the-labor-force>) that show that only 34% of people ages 21 – 64 with intellectual disabilities are employed.

The allowances in this bill would have been beneficial to Elizabeth and indeed we discussed this as an option during transition planning within her IEP. Our school district was willing to continue her IEP, but only if she remained in Bismarck. At the time, we did not push further to see how post-secondary opportunities locally could have been woven into a continuing IEP and the options we were offered did not meet the challenging goals she had for herself. Elizabeth wanted to go to college like her friends and was set on attending Minot State University so she made the decision to officially graduate.

From Day 1, Elizabeth has stretched herself. When told that she was supposed to audit her classes, she demanded to be allowed to take them for credit. When advised that maybe some kind of public relations/hospitality coursework would be good, she advocated to work with young children. When her first roommate moved out, she found a new one who is now a lifelong friend. Thinking she wasn't busy enough; she took herself over to cheerleading tryouts and called to say she was cheering for the Beavers.

Youth with intellectual disabilities should have the same options as their peers who don't have disabilities. SB 2269 helps to create equity for students who have potential and just need a different set of supports to help them fulfill their dreams.

Thank you for your time and I'll take any questions you might have.

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