



House Bill 1530
Tuesday, March 25, 2025

Chair Beard and members of the Senate Education Committee,

My name is Kendra Vander Wal, and I am the executive director at Designer Genes. Designer Genes' mission is to strengthen opportunities for individuals with Down syndrome and those who support them to earn, learn, and belong. I bring with me a background in special education, as I have a minor in the field. I am also a parent of a 7-year-old son with Down syndrome.

I am here today to support House Bill 1530. This bill is an important step toward addressing some of the issues impacting our special education teachers and the students who rely on them across the state. Collaboration with special educators is key when determining these challenges and can allow us to be proactive in finding techniques, preventative strategies, and necessary solutions that benefit the whole special education team. Gaining insight on tasks conducted both during the school day and outside of school hours to accommodate students will help us continue to understand workload needs, trainings that aide student and teacher development, necessary paperwork, as well as paraprofessional support and management.

Nearly all individuals with Down syndrome who access public school-based education receive instruction and support from a special education teacher. These educators play a vital role in adapting curriculum, implementing individualized education programs (IEPs), and providing the specialized instruction necessary for students with Down syndrome to thrive. Special education teachers remain central to ensuring these students receive appropriate academic and developmental supports. A study of special education services would help identify strengths and gaps in the system, ensuring that students with Down syndrome and other disabilities receive the resources and instruction they need to succeed in school.

As a parent, I have seen the importance of collaborating with the special education team through the process of creating my son's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) as well as the ongoing communication needed to help him be successful at school each week. We are new to our elementary school this year, and having our son placed with a new first grade teacher, friend group, and special education team was nerve racking for our family. Questions constantly circled our heads in the weeks leading up to his school year – Will he be welcomed in his new school and classroom? Will his teachers get to know him with large class sizes? Will he be challenged and expectations set high? Will he regress? Will he be kicked out of school if he elopes on playground or if he plays too rough with his peers? Will he advocate for himself?

And through all the worry and doubt- we were met with patience, kindness, and support from his special education teacher. She took the time to hear our concerns, came up with solutions, gathered information from our family, and read through the many documents from our previous school to make sure she understood my son – all in anticipation for the school and done during summer months. Now that we are into the school year, his special education teacher continues to develop creative solutions and problem solve with us, in collaboration with his classroom teacher and paraprofessionals, each day to



make sure our son is supported. That's the kind of teacher my son deserves – that's the kind of teacher all individuals with disabilities deserve.

And yet, through all the wonderful support we have received since starting in August, we have seen paraprofessionals leave. For our son, the transition of paraprofessionals resulted in a change in his school routine and we saw a spike in his behaviors. He was confused as to why he no longer gets to see one of his favorite teachers anymore. Through it all, I recognize these impacts span farther than my son. I now see the teaching team having to address special education team schedule changes and workload disparities to accommodate the missing paraprofessional. I acknowledge the shift in responsibility regarding student and administrative paperwork, special education communication that comes in now after school hours, and dedicated time to train new staff on the students that the previous paraprofessional worked with.

The findings from this study will be invaluable in identifying key areas of need so that we can shape policies that ensure our special education teachers have the resources, training, and support they need to succeed in their roles. Better understanding of safety of staff and students is important for adequate crisis plans, de-escalation techniques, and proper trainings. Lastly, better understanding workload disparities as well as paraprofessional support could improve retention rates for special education teachers but also ensure that all students with disabilities, including those with Down syndrome, have access to high-quality education and the support they deserve.

By taking action, we can begin the process of improving the working conditions for special education teachers and, in turn, enhance educational outcomes for students with disabilities across our state. Designer Genes recognizes this work cannot be done alone and would be willing to partner in any way possible. Thank you for your time and consideration.



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