

I grew up in West Hartford and returned to Connecticut in 2012, after years of living in Brooklyn, NY with my two kids, one of whom was diagnosed with early childhood depression, sensory processing disorder and later, ADHD. I can tell you that I did not make the move without trepidation—the last thing a child with mental health issues needs is instability or an unpredictable schedule. In fact, most children I know thrive when they feel there is a healthy mix of daily structure and flexible personal support.

That means, in plain English, that when they ask questions about school, they have loads of them. Where will I go to school? How far away is the bus ride? Can we walk? Who will be my teacher? Will I have help in math? Will I have art or music or both? What is OT (occupational therapy) and why do I have to take off my socks to do it? Where is the bathroom? Will there be a snack? Do I need to do everything after school or can I do some of it during the day so I don't miss afternoon activities?

You get the idea—and you've probably faced many of those questions or asked them yourself. They are all valid. They can't all be answered.

But if MORE concrete answers were available to families—even if they were a concrete NO—I think students would be better able to handle challenges and parents would have a an easier time preparing their child for a productive week or day or year ahead. Simply KNOWING what is to come and having a routine cannot be underestimated. How do I know this?

First, personal experience. My son did well in a private middle and high school in Hartford. After our move out of the public school system, he did *not* cope with constant changes, new environments, an abundance of changes in schedules or services or a long commute to school—all of which can undermine the mental health of a student who has difficult dealing with daily challenges. Second, I am the author of the book *The Elephant in the Playroom*, published by Penguin. I interviewed hundreds of families to learn about the real-life roller coaster of parenting a special needs child. I am not wealthy. I am not married. I do not have outside support. I spent every penny I had on my son's education until I had no more. Because honestly, if the kid thrives the family does too.

I could not be prouder of my son, more thankful to his school and his grandparents who have steered him along the path to becoming a photography and design student at Parsons next year. His mind was free enough of worry, finally, after many years, to focus on creating photos and doing schoolwork. He now speaks in public and has friends he has known for years. His former therapist and math teachers congratulate him on college acceptances in the hallways or at the lunch table. They know his name. They know his progress. It has not been an easy ride, but the one thing he could count on was school.

That is why I support H.B. 7255, which establishes a task force to conduct a feasibility study regarding the creation of a Special Education Predictable Cost Cooperative. Every teacher, family, and student deserves to know what they can and cannot get and have a stable environment for learning. A Special Education Predictable Cost Cooperative, in my opinion, would do the following:

- Help schools create a feasibility model that could be shared across the state and used to create more predictable budgets and school plans.
- Identify cost efficiencies and spend money more wisely by identifying what the key “deal breaking” services are each year and how they can be afforded.
- Bring more stability to the entire school district, including kids without special challenges, who want to know what and where and even why their school day is constructed the way it is.
- Makes it easier for superintendents, boards of education, and the families they serve to be pro-active communicators of information that they have available and can explain.

Additionally, while a Special Education Predictable Cost Cooperative doesn't deal with service delivery or student identification, the predictability in special education funding it provides can help school districts properly plan and explore how to improve special education services, and work more with parents to ensure their children have access to the services they need.

We need to suspend using a system of guessing and constant change for school budgets. It is very clear to me that wherever these children go, there will be 1 in 5 growing up with a learning disability and 26% facing a mental health issue every single year. Whether they have a 504 or an IEP or whatever you want to call it, it needs a stable model, critical thinking, and smart fiscal choices. That is what H.B. 7255 can achieve.