

My name is Venezia Michalsen, but most people call me Venice because it's easier to pronounce. I am a born and bred Connecticut woman, from a Connecticut family, and we are devoted to this state. I went to the YMCA for nursery school, West Woods for elementary school, to the old Hamden Middle School, and graduated from Hamden High School in 1994. I moved to NYC for college and graduate school, and stayed there for 20 years. I now have a doctorate, a tenured faculty position at a public University, and I'm in the end stages of completing my first book.

My son Bowie was born in 2011, and we lived in a small apartment in Brooklyn, NY. He was a very, very difficult infant, and then was a happy, always-smiling and easy child from five months until about two years. At that time, my husband and I started to realize that something was wrong. He had hundreds of words, but he couldn't make a sentence. He loved being with close family and his babysitter, but he could not be with other children. On his first day at day care, I was called to come get him after just twenty minutes. I called Early Intervention (New York's version of Birth to Three) after a lot of agonizing. We then suffered through clumsy, nasty evaluators, inept and completely unsupported therapists. Despite good jobs, beloved friends and a great apartment, we decided to move back to Hamden to be near family, and because we had heard great things about Connecticut's Birth to Three Program. We were not disappointed: our night-and-day-different B23 team was on our porch, playing on the floor with Bowie the day after we moved, and we saw him improve his communication and increase his frustration tolerance before our very eyes. From there, Bowie moved on to Alice Peck Early Learning Center for two years in Special Education Preschool, and he is now in an IIC (Special Education) Kindergarten at West Woods School, where I spent my elementary school years.

Bowie has made incredible progress in Hamden Public Schools due to the devotion and hard work of so many dedicated, creative, smart and hard working professionals, from speech therapists, behavior analysts, and occupational therapists to teachers, administrators and para professionals. In fact, just tonight I was on the phone with one of my elected officials as Bowie was getting out of the bath, preparing to brush his teeth. This legislator heard as Bowie asked me, "Mommy, who are you talking to?" and they exchanged a back-and-forth conversation for a few lines to say goodnight. When I got back on the phone, I reminded this person that just more than a year ago, my concern for Bowie was that he could only engage in scripted speech, nothing conversational. The change is dramatic, but there is still a lot to go.

While I am not pleased with the delay in enacting the predictable cost cooperative, I am writing to support Proposed HB 7255 AN ACT ESTABLISHING A TASK FORCE TO CONDUCT A FEASIBILITY STUDY REGARDING THE CREATION OF A SPECIAL EDUCATION PREDICTABLE COST COOPERATIVE because it will pursue the equitable distribution of special education aid because I and my fellow special education parents are daily bumping up against the limitations of restricted resources, particularly when it comes to staffing and facilities. In short: neither are where they need to be. Among other issues:

- Facilities are sorely lacking: from the crumbling facilities and lack of air conditioning in the summer at Alice Peck to the fact that West Woods is physically unchanged from over 30 years ago when I was a student there.
- When it comes to staff, there are a lot of amazing people doing a lot of hard work. But everyone is overworked to the point of (literally) falling asleep in meetings, and

paraprofessionals and teachers are either above and beyond amazing despite the low pay, or they are terrible but unchangeable. No matter what, there aren't enough of them.

- I see many teachers who are demoralized and underpaid, many paraprofessionals are untrained and underpaid, a lack of specialists (such as BCBAs, SLPs, OTs, PTs) to go around, and a dearth of space or staff to teach the kids what they need to be taught, what will take to see them flourish.

My son Bowie is a brilliant five year old boy, doing second grade level math and reading, doing beautiful drawings of Peabody dinosaur bones with his “Papa Bear” (my dad), blazing trails in the woods with his “Birdie” (my mom), telling jokes about how seven eight nine (get it?), eating snowflakes as they fall from the sky, and playing Legos, trains, art, technology and cars with us and his playdate friends. He has come so very far in the two and a half short years that we have been in Connecticut, but he (and his special education friends!) could be doing so much more. I encourage you to establish the Connecticut Special Education Predictable Cost Cooperative Task Force so that Hamden can get its fair share of resources for our children.

Finally: It is very important to me that this Task Force have a member who is the parent of a child in special education. To exclude the wisdom and experience of such a parent would undermine the usefulness and impact of such a committee.

Thank you.

Venezia Michalsen, PhD
Hamden, CT 06517