

I am Lissa Zukoff, NYS PTA special Education Specialist and proud member of the Nassau Region PTA, Sanford Calhoun HS PTSA, Bellmore-Merrick SEPTA, Long Island Pride PTSA and NYS Pride PTSA.

I am joined today by a number of my colleagues from the NYS PTA from Nassau and Suffolk Counties, including Vice President Joan Wabnik, Suffolk Region Director Wendy Natalone, Nassau Region Director Shari Beck, Field Support Coordinator Pat Assortato, Wellness Coordinator Patricia Genco, Family Engagement Coordinator Megan Zarchy, Juvenile Protection Specialist Namiko Suga, Programs Coordinator Sarah Henris, Environment Specialist Maria Sanders, Literacy Specialist Tina Shek, and Resolutions Coordinator Susan Fisher.

Long Island is a special place in our state, and we are proud to represent the 69,906 PTA members in Nassau County, and the 48,844 members in Suffolk. It is our mission to make every child's potential a reality and support EVERY child with ONE voice.

In Buffalo, our testimony focused on supporting student mental health. Today, we will focus on supporting students with disabilities in any updated formula we make work on together.

In 2022, 484,147 NYS students received special education services in our school buildings. In 2007, the year Foundation Aid was enacted, 408,856 students were receiving special education services. Despite our student and population

decline, our student with disabilities population significantly increased. And NYS PTA is proud of our advocacy to increase supports, programs and services in our school buildings, homes and communities.

Despite advances, districts still struggle with funding, and meeting Least Restrictive Environments for students under IDEA.

Importantly, we also must support a Free and Appropriate Education until at least age 22. A recent ruling of the Second Circuit Court of Appeals requires public schools to provide special education services to students with disabilities until 22 unless they have obtained a high school diploma. Currently, State Law provides state funding to students only through the school year in which the student turns 21.

We have submitted lengthy testimony, which includes a number of personal stories from my colleagues here today. I am thankful for their willingness to share their special education journey. I would like to briefly share ours

When my oldest son was 18-months-old, after discussion with his pediatrician, I scheduled an evaluation with Early Intervention. I didn't expect it to be a big deal, after all - he was just a baby. The evaluator came in with a suitcase of toys and laid it on the floor. She opened it, took one out, and tried to engage him. He didn't pay any attention to her, but went to the suitcase, got inside, and started licking it. I glanced at her, and

watched the pen fly over the forms. That was when I realized I was in way over my head!

As I am sure you can imagine, many services were recommended. He attended a center based preschool, required a 1:1 aide in elementary school, and had a plethora of services during his time in the public school system. I also received parent training and frequent collaborative communication from school personnel. As he got older and transition was upon us, we took advantage of ACCESS-VR and other resources available to us - all with support of our school. In time, that baby graduated high school with honors, is now attending college & is working a part time job. Are there still plenty of bumps in the road? Yes, of course. But he is only on this path to success because of the incredible support and services he had available to him.

To be clear - college is not the sign of success for every child. Our children are unique and diverse, with many different strengths and needs. But no child's future should be decided when they are in kindergarten, and their opportunities cannot be limited due to a lack of funding.

Another one of my children was greatly impacted by Covid. Due to his disability, he was unable to learn virtually, and his mental health suffered as a result. He missed years of school, and it took much trial and error to find an appropriate placement. He won't graduate when expected, and will need special education services past his eighteenth birthday - but he will graduate,

which we were not always sure would happen. This has been a difficult and emotional time for all of us, and without the access to services and support from our district, and their willingness to work with our private physicians and therapists, I don't know where he would be.

We have a long way to go when it comes to supporting our students' mental health, and the cost for this can't be borne solely by the schools.

We are your average middle class family. Like all New Yorkers, we depend on our amazing school personnel to help recognize red flags, and to ensure that no learner falls through the cracks. The thought that any youngster in this great state would not have the chance to reach their true potential due to funding, is terrifying. Many families face barriers to educational equity that I don't. And in order to best understand the needs of students, engagement with all caregivers is essential. We must level the playing field, and ensure all families in all school districts have access to a free and appropriate public education. We thank you for your time and commitment to this work, as together we can make every child's potential a reality.