

Education and the Workforce
Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education Subcommittee Hearing

Subcommittee Chairman Rokita, Ranking Member Polis, and Members of the Committee on Education and the Workforce:

On behalf of my son Jacob, and all students with disabilities and their families, I thank you for the opportunity to speak on the issue of School Choice and Equitable Access to a Quality Education.

BACKGROUND

My name is Almo J. Carter. Almost 9 years ago I brought home from the hospital a baby boy who I adopted as a single parent. Jacob grew in my heart those 38 weeks before he was born in 2008, and I'm thrilled to nurture, raise-up, and love him! As a new mommy at the time, I took seriously the responsibilities of being a parent and I believed I was prepared intellectually, emotionally and financially to meet the challenges associated with single motherhood.

Fortunately, I was able to spend the first 6 months of Jacob's life at home—enjoying bonding time, cuddling together and watching him grow. With my impending return to work fast approaching, I had to make childcare arrangements for Jacob. Admittedly, I was a little overwhelmed with the options available for childcare as well as the considerations that went into making the 'right and appropriate choice.' In the end, I selected a wonderful childcare center where Jacob was well-cared for and safe.

Immediately following placement, I noticed infants as young as 4 months were meeting developmental milestones that Jacob—at 7 months--was barely approaching. These observations prompted our quest to identify Jacob's developmental deficiencies and delays while learning as much as possible about his biological history. Subsequently, we started working with a cadre of medical specialists, i.e., developmental pediatrics, genetics, neurology, pediatric ophthalmology, urology, etc., as well as child development researchers and professionals. Over the next 15 months a series of doctor visits, assessments, tests, an MRI, and targeted studies revealed Jacob's underlying diagnosis of Fragile X Syndrome (FXS), followed by a Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS) diagnosis. During this time we were introduced to the Strong Start DC Early Intervention Program (DCEIP) and through its access to resources and coordination of care Jacob began receiving early intervention services and support. Due to Jacob's disability the panoply of options were limited

The middle child of 3, I've always been a strong believer in fairness and finding common ground in all situations. In fact the tenets of my essence are equity, opportunity and access for all and this applies to Jacob's education as well. Having been entrusted with Jacob's care and well-being, I will stop at nothing to ensure Jacob realizes his full potential and develops into a productive and positively contributing member of society. Driven by my unyielding desire for Jacob's success, along with 25 years of combined professional and personal advocacy, my practice is to investigate and analyze every educational opportunity available to secure Jacob's equitable access to a quality education. Not every parent has the time, ability and wherewithal to

do so where “quality” is measured against the relevant, appropriate, high-quality standards, and effective delivery of instruction.

Shortly after the initial discovery of Jacob’s developmental delays, I placed him at Easter Seals-- a center-oriented childcare facility--where Jacob could regularly interact with typically developing peers and receive the required therapeutic services in accordance with his Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Before Jacob turned 3 years old we started the transition process to access early childhood education through Early Stages, DC Public Schools. Filled with optimism and encouraged with Jacob’s medical prognosis I was eager to learn the available options for Jacob’s access to a quality education in my community. I started with our neighborhood public school. Although the neighborhood school had an Autism self-contained classroom it was not a placement with which I felt comfortable. I also decided to consider some of the “high-performing” charter schools and explore their programming for students with disabilities.

After attending several charter school open houses, speaking directly with special education staff about services and talking to families already attending, I was not entirely convinced that my school choice options understood and were equipped to appropriately educate Jacob. However, I ended up applying to a few charter schools through the lottery process that I felt were in a position and equipped to serve Jacob’s needs. We were unsuccessful in securing a spot in any of the charter schools we had applied. Consequently, DCPS was our best option and we moved forward through the eligibility and determination process. It is important to note here, similar to my search for daycare, that the panoply of “choice” was narrowed and in fact not a viable choice for Jacob due to his disability.

Following comprehensive research and investigation I zealously advocated for Jacob’s placement in DC Public School’s “flagship” Autism program, which at the time I believed was an appropriate school choice that would afford him equitable access to a quality education. With the help of his multidisciplinary team (MDT) I placed Jacob in the Autism program and he started public school at 4 years of age. Over the next couple of school years the Autism program underwent system-wide changes and experienced a series of unexpected and volatile staffing challenges which negatively impacted Jacob’s academic success in the self-contained classroom. That instability coupled with changes in Jacob’s education requirements as he developed and expanded his capacity to learn prompted an immediate change through his IEP to a general education classroom where it was required he receive specialized instruction both inside and outside the general education setting.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND SAFEGUARDS IN SCHOOL CHOICE FOR EQUITABLE ACCESS TO A QUALITY EDUCATION

All schools whether public, public charter, publically funded vouchers or virtual must, in my opinion, comply with the same uniform, comprehensive accountability standards and safeguards in order to be equitable. However, right now, only public schools and public charter schools are held to the same comprehensive accountability standards and safeguards. Strong accountability measures across school choice options will not only serve to reduce subjectivity, but it will also yield practical and accurate measures of whether equitable access to a quality education has been attained allowing for transparency of the educational system. This allows parents to make informed decisions about choice options.

When evaluating public school choice and equitable access to a quality education it is imperative for families to understand the safeguards and protections of IDEA – namely a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) and due process protections. This must be coupled with complete, accurate and consistent information with which to compare and analyze. Families and their students with disabilities should, at a minimum consider the availability of specialized instruction and related therapeutic services (OT, PT, speech), service delivery model, i.e., inclusion vs. self-contained, as well as transparency and accountability safeguards, i.e., process, protocol and procedures, etc., across public school choice domains. Each public school choice option should be transparent in communication and school administrators, educators, and staff should all be held accountable for their responsibility to help educate children. A school's number one goal should be the appropriate, effective and successful education of ALL students, including those with disabilities.

Generally, public school systems have an organizational structure and hierarchy of authority that promote transparency and accountability. For the most part, the public school system complies with requirements in IDEA such as a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and due process protections, and gives regular notice of the parent and student's rights and responsibilities. When a violation of IDEA occurs, parents have recourse under IDEA to activate their due process rights. This ability for recourse is of paramount importance to families and their children. In my experience, private school choice programs do not provide protections and parental rights akin to those that a public school system has. In most situations, parents of students with disabilities are stripped of their rights when they enter a private school with a voucher, if the private school even accepts the student with a disability in the first place.

Candidly, I perceive the risk of private school choice options to be too great and not worth the possibility of foreclosing Jacob's equitable access to an appropriate quality education as mandated and protected by IDEA. In the [DC] public school system recourse opportunities are more readily accessible and include the Executive Office of the Mayor and the City Council as well as the safeguards mentioned earlier under IDEA including due process protections. In my experience for-profit charter schools' organizational culture, attitudes and communicated interests are forces that drive a business model mentality and approach to mass or bulk education. And because it is perhaps perceived to be significantly more costly to appropriately educate students with disabilities, a cost-benefit analysis might reveal a negative effect on their

bottom line. Furthermore, it tends to be even more challenging (and very expensive for families) for traditional private schools to address educational requirements and/or accommodate students with disabilities. Thus, my familiarity, level of comfort and previous success navigating the public school system has benefitted Jacob causing us to stay.

INCLUSION IS ESSENTIAL TO EQUITABLE ACCESS TO A QUALITY EDUCATION AND PARAMOUNT TO SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY INTEGRATION

As Jacob has matured and his needs have changed, inclusive educational opportunities with appropriate educational supports and services are of paramount importance. My research and investigation into non-public special education school programs reveal that meaningful inclusion opportunities are non-existent. Similarly, for-profit and unaccountable charters schools, boast mission-specific programming that doesn't include inclusive opportunities.

A way to increase inclusive practices involves a commitment from individual and collective school leadership to inclusive programming, followed by collaboration and the leveraging of current resources for access to targeted training that will help build and increase capacity to serve greater numbers of students in a meaningful manner. For Jacob equitable access to quality education now includes meaningful inclusion. Research supports meaningful opportunities of inclusion that foster social interaction, learning and engagement between disabled and non-disabled students. Consistent and equitable implementation of an inclusion model is also known to facilitate successful community integration. Thus, my school choice for Jacob remains in the public school system where he has the opportunity to be educated to the greatest extent possible with his general education peers and where I am confident that his educational rights are protected under the IDEA.

In conclusion, Jacob will remain in the public school system. Knowing that my child will be educated with the services, accommodation and protections afforded him by the IDEA in an inclusive environment is paramount. As a mother I will continue to advocate on behalf of my son and other students with disabilities to help ensure that they are ALL afforded equitable access to a quality public education.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify on this critical issue and I look forward to answering your questions.

