

Hello. My name is Jennifer Karls. I am the parent of a daughter in 7th grade in the Functional Life Skills program and my son is a 4th grader. I have the privilege of serving as the President of the Bellevue Special Needs PTA with 9 other extremely dedicated volunteers. We currently have 88 members and even more people with whom we are communicating on a regular basis. We have been overwhelmed by the support and interest in our PTA both within the district and the greater community.

Our PTA's mission is to Advocate, Connect and Educate. We consider a student with special needs to be any student who needs additional support, accommodations, and/or intervention in order to be successful in their social and learning environment.

We meet with Dr. Mills on a regular basis and we appreciate his support and willingness to listen and hear our concerns. He has helped to facilitate conversations with other administrators and staff including Eva Collins and Patty Siegwarth.

It is through these conversations that we are beginning to understand in more detail the Special Education process in Bellevue and to give feedback on how that process can look and feel to families. We thank Dr. Mills and the school board for your willingness to conduct a thorough, independent study of the Special Education program. We feel that this is such an important step and are excited about the process moving forward in the coming weeks.

Through our work over the last several months we have heard from dozens of parents with specific issues and even more with general concerns. Many of these issues are systemic and affect families across the district in our elementary, middle and high schools. We consistently hear about issues with IEP & 504 implementation, inability to get evaluations, lack of program information and consistency, concerns with RTI implementation and notification, and the use of policies and procedures that are unfamiliar to families and cannot be referenced.

One overarching theme of all of these conversations is a lack of communication with parents, which excludes parents from their child's educational programming. This is of immense concern to our PTA Board. I would like to share with you an example of a situation that may help to clarify.

We have heard from many families impacted by what is referred to as a "new policy" by school district staff. This has been rolled out over the last several months. Our understanding is the policy was applied with the intent of meeting best practices and adding minutes of service. While the policy itself is not necessarily in question, the blanket application is of concern and the implementation has excluded parent involvement. Specifically of concern is that student's locations of services were changed, number of minutes of service adjusted and curriculum changes made. In most cases these changes came as a complete surprise to the parents involved.

Parents are members of the IEP team and if they were truly valued members of those teams and of the district, these changes should never have come as a surprise to any of them. Parents were left to try to understand why the changes were being made and how it would impact their children with almost no explanation from the school or administration. There are procedural safeguards in place that if properly administered should have alleviated most issues with implementation. While it is helpful that we now understand this situation, we remain concerned that not all families impacted are aware of the changes that affect their child's education program.

We have heard from many families that are leaving the Bellevue Public Schools to move to private schools or being forced to home school their children. Some of those families are leaving Bellevue all together. They are leaving our schools because their precious and valuable children are not receiving the help that they need to be successful and to make progress. These are parents that are dedicated volunteers, members of PTA's, donating to their schools and to the BSF. We are losing those families in our community because the district is failing their children.

It is our fervent hope that we will be able to work with this school board and district administration to bring to light issues that impact students and families and to work together to create solutions. We are pleased that there will be a review of the special education program but there also needs to be more immediate transparency of policies, procedures and programs for parents and educators and efforts to increase meaningful communication. Reassuring our families that the mission of this district is truly that ALL children will reach their full potential.

I ask you to keep in mind that there needs to be a sense of urgency in addressing systemic problems. Our children don't get their 3rd grade or their 7th grade or their freshman year back. Once this year has gone by our children don't get that opportunity to learn and grow and progress again.

Parents need to feel as if they are partners in this journey, that they are being acknowledged, appreciated and respected in the process and that their children are treated with compassion. As parents we have grown weary of things just happening to our children and to us. We understand that special education is complicated for many reasons. But we are bright, articulate and passionate parents who understand complicated. We want to be part of the conversation not just told how things are or that something can't be done. We want to understand limitations and have meaningful dialogue about challenges.

Like any other parents, we have hopes and dreams for our children whether they are non-verbal or twice exceptional. The path may be rockier and less sure but we work very hard so our children have every opportunity to reach their full potential and we expect nothing less from the school district. We want to work with the Bellevue School District to create exceptional programs that will lead the way in special education not only in Washington but also across the nation.

We owe it to the families in our community but more importantly we owe it to our amazing children, who make extraordinary efforts everyday. Who, like all children, can learn and be creative and are unique and valuable. Thank you for the time to share with you today.