Testimony in Support of
An Act to Improve Augmentative and Alternative Communication Opportunities
for Students with Disabilities
H.403 (Rep. Barber) , S. 318 (Sen. O’Connor)
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My name is Julia Landau, and I am the Director of the Autism Special Education Legal Support Center and the Disability Education Justice Project at Massachusetts Advocates for Children (MAC). MAC’s mission is to remove barriers to educational and life opportunities for children and youth. We focus our advocacy on children and youth who face significant barriers, inequities, and/or discrimination because of their economic status, disability, race, ethnicity/culture, immigration status, English Learner status, and/or traumatic life experiences.

MAC strongly supports An Act to Improve Augmentative and Alternative Communication Opportunities for Students with Disabilities, H. 403, S.318, which addresses the educational needs of children with autism and other disabilities who are nonspeaking and have limited speech. This bill requires that all teachers who apply for an initial Massachusetts educator license receive instruction on the use of augmentative and alternative communication devices when teaching students. H.403 and S.318 reflect the findings and recommendations included in the Massachusetts Autism Commission’s first report issued in 2013.

These bills will make a huge difference in the lives of thousands of children who are nonverbal or have limited speech, by ensuring that all special education and general education teachers are capable of educating children who rely on AAC to communicate. This includes not only the 1/3 of the state’s children with autism who are estimated to be nonverbal, but also children with cerebral palsy, acquired brain injury, intellectual, and other disabilities.

H.40d and S. 318 address barriers to implementation of existing requirements of federal special education law. IDEA already requires districts to provide assistive communication technology devices and services required by students to receive an appropriate education. However, MAC’s case advocacy experience has demonstrated that all too often, AAC devices end up “gathering dust” in a classroom, because teachers, through no fault of their own, don’t have required training. Children who are nonverbal or have limited speech are therefore often denied the essential AAC systems needed to communicate effectively with teachers and peers and to make effective progress.
As a result, educators fail to recognize the potential and competency of these students. As stated in the first Massachusetts Autism Commission Report:

> In many instances, Augmentative and Alternative Communication technology remains unavailable to children with autism, either because school districts lack expertise and resources to support appropriate assistive technology or students are not referred to appropriate specialists.

In 2010, the Commonwealth took an important first step for this population of students by enacting a law (Chapter 299 of the Acts of 2010) requiring that new teachers of students with moderate disabilities and teachers of students with severe disabilities receive instruction on the appropriate use of augmentative and alternative communication devices and other assistive technologies. H.403 and S.318 build on this statute by ensuring that all teachers, including early childhood special education teachers and general education teachers, know what is necessary to include and teach students who use AAC devices to communicate.

The ability to communicate is considered a basic right and a critical component of education, and has a direct impact on educational progress. Research demonstrates that use of AAC in general and special education settings for students who are nonverbal or have limited speech can lead to tremendous gains in academic, communication, social, and functional skills, and participation in a more complex curriculum. Furthermore, the inability to communicate can directly lead to increased behavioral difficulties.

This legislation will not only help to level the playing field for children with autism and other disabilities, but it is cost-effective, facilitating successful inclusion and placements in less restrictive settings. To facilitate education and inclusion of students with students who are nonverbal or have limited speech, teachers must be adequately prepared to teach students who require AAC. MAC strongly encourages the Joint Committee on Education to give a favorable report in order to address the needs of these children, who have been marginalized and left behind for far too long.