Oral Testimony
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H.403, S.318  An Act to Improve Augmentative and Alternative Communication Opportunities for Children with Disabilities

I am a dually certified and state licensed speech and language pathologist (SLP) and board certified behavior analyst (BCBA). I have been working as an augmentative alternative communication (AAC) specialist for 12 years. I currently serve on the AAC Practice Competencies Committee for the American Speech and Hearing Association, and am adjunct faculty at Northeastern University.

The importance of AAC in the classroom is illustrated by my experience with a child I will call James, an 8-year-old boy with autism. Whenever his teachers sat near him James would hit himself in the head to a point where he would give himself concussions. If his teacher did not move away, James would hit and bite, causing bruising and drawing blood. James spent most of his school day isolated and unable to learn. James did not have functional speech. He had no way to communicate with others, and what he really wanted was attention. Fortunately, James received a communication device, and over time I was able to work with the teacher, so that she had the skills she needed to teach him. Now, James is frequently using his device to say “I want hugs” and “Tickles please.” When his device is present he very rarely hits himself or aggresses on others. As a result, he can sit at his desk and learn, play with his teachers, and is learning how to make friends. His parents and teachers no longer worry about his health and safety at school. His administration no longer worries about the need to be placed in a private setting because without this intervention he would need to be restrained for safety.

This story is not an isolated event. It is an example of the potential across every communication exchange for every student using AAC across the state. It affects a high school AAC user in a biology class the same way that it affects a preschool AAC user trying to make friends on the playground. Without teachers knowledgeable about how to teach children who rely on AAC, these countless exchanges may never happen, and individuals who are without functional speech become more isolated than they already are. They lose innumerable academic and social opportunities, and are less likely to be successful communicating in emergencies.

When AAC knowledge is absent, an undue burden is also placed on school administrations. An environment that is void of AAC supports can often mean social isolation, increased risk for behavioral issues, etc. This can lead to additional and potentially unnecessary costs, such as tuition at an outplacement setting, hiring outside contractors to conduct trainings, or purchase of unnecessary / underused equipment. This bill will reduce these undue costs by giving special and general educators foundational knowledge to maximize existing AAC strategies, thereby maximizing the educational environment.

By signing this bill into law, you are correcting an injustice by ensuring that AAC users in our great state will have access to the same opportunities as speaking children.