Written Testimony in Support of HR 403 and S.318, An act to improve augmentative and alternative communication opportunities for children with disabilities.

Date: 9/2/19

Good morning,

My name is Dr. Kerry Davis. I am a speech language pathologist and augmentative alternative communication (AAC) coordinator at the Spaulding Outpatient Center in Lexington. I provide therapy to children with severe speech and language impairments. About half of the children who receive speech therapy at Spaulding have little to no speech, and require technology to serve as their voice. Before coming to Spaulding, I worked 16 years within a public school setting, serving as district-wide speech pathologist and augmentative communication specialist.

Many students are going back to school this week, excited to meet their new teachers, or see their friends. But for many children with disabilities, they will not have the support to say a simple “hi” or call their friends by name. They won’t have the ability to ask to see the nurse if they are sick or answer the teacher’s questions in class about their summer. Augmentative communication is critical in filling this gap. Augmentative communication is critical in filling in this gap.

I have countless stories of children who have found their voice through technology, but the one story I would like to share is of my former student, Jenny. I met Jenny when she was in Kindergarten. At the time, Jenny used a stick connected to her pink Red Sox hat to point to letters written on a piece of paper. She spelled out single words to let us know what she needed. Jenny used her head to spell because she could not physically speak, and had little volitional movement of her arms and hands. Jenny has cerebral palsy. It was remarkable for any 5 year old to be able to spell, but Jenny had learned out of necessity. It was also exhausting for her. Imagine if this hearing relied on us all spelling out every single word to talk to one another; we would be here for a week instead of an afternoon. Then technology started to catch up with Jenny needs. We matched Jenny with an augmentative device that could detect her eye movements and move a cursor on a computer. This software allowed her look at the words and make sentences rather than point to each letter with a stick. This opened up her world. By the time middle school rolled around Jenny could both move around independently in her power wheelchair and talk to any one she wanted. She learned how to customize her system and program it with her eyes. She was often seen in the hallway joking with her friends, who readily embraced her as a peer.

When I tested Jenny in first grade she was diagnosed as moderately delayed. By 5th grade, she scored within the average range for language. Without the support of her family and the willingness of her classroom teachers to learn, Jenny’s outcomes would have likely been quite different. Most teachers, through no fault of their own, lack the training to teach kids like Jenny. It is highly unusual for school districts to have in-house AAC experts like myself.
But that is just one story, one profile of student. The landscape of learners within the classroom continues to grow and change. The Center for Disease Control (2019) estimated that the prevalence of autism is now 1:59 children. Of those children, approximately 40% have no words at all (National Autism Association, 2019). This means that walking down the hall in any given school, just about every other classroom in that hallway likely includes a child with autism. In those classrooms there is likely a child who needs – or is currently using - technology to communicate.

During my tenure in public school I developed such a deep sense of admiration for my teacher colleagues. They would give up their lunch breaks, email late at night, or come in early, looking for guidance on how to support these students. Like any of us who go into this field, we are committed to providing the best learning opportunities for our students and patients. By making augmentative communication a part of the teacher licensure requirements, they will have yet one more “tool in the toolbox” to help their students learn.

I fully endorse HR 403, *An act to improve augmentative and alternative communication opportunities for children with disabilities*.

Respectfully submitted,

Kerry J. Davis, EdD, CCC/SLP