

Vice President Hubert Humphrey said in a speech "...the moral test of government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; those who are in the shadows of life; the sick, the needy and the handicapped."

If this is how Pennsylvania was to be measured on our morality and our greatness, then we have failed. My name is Lisa and I am a proud Pennsylvanian; my children are the 4th generation in my family to be born, raised and educated in Pennsylvania. It is because I love Pennsylvania so much that I am here today to speak to you. Because I want to make PA better for my kids and for all kids.

My oldest son Kevin has a chromosome condition called dup15q, an extremely rare and completely random genetic mutation. There is no known cause or cure for dup15q. As a result, Kevin has autism and is intellectually and visually impaired. He is independently mobile, but overall, unfortunately, he's very low functioning. Still, I can't imagine life without him.

As a parent, I would do just about anything to not have to hang all my hopes and dreams for my child on one document, his IEP. But those are not the cards I was dealt. His IEP is his only chance at normalcy. I have behaviorists in my home every day until 5:30. He does outside therapies and other activities paid for out of pocket or with private insurance. We are doing as much as we can on our own. I have to depend on the school district because that is where he spends over 30 hours a week and they have the expertise and collective resources that our family does not have.

In 2013 I went to the National Autism Conference organized by Patten and PDE. In every conference session, the experts talked about Evidence Based Programming and how we have the knowledge today to give these kids what they need to be contributing members of society. While it was encouraging to hear about what is working, I left the conference wondering where the disconnect is. If PDE is touting evidence based programming in the schools, why aren't we seeing it? A recent UPenn study tells us that less than 40% of our schools are providing evidence based programs with fidelity. Why is it such a struggle to get the schools to commit to providing this...as the law says they should?

It can only come down to one thing—money. Money is the big pink elephant in the room at every IEP meeting. They don't have the money to provide what our kids need. This problem of not having adequate and appropriate funding goes far beyond the child not having their needs met. Turnover rate for special education teachers is extremely high. In communities it often can pit stakeholder groups against each other. Parents of special needs kids are made to feel bad simply for asking that their child receive the education that they are entitled to. And these families, the ones who rely on school supports the most, end up in adversarial, contentious and even hostile relationships with school personnel. All because of inadequate funding.

I know that IDEA 1975 was never fully funded. Diagnoses and need for special education has skyrocketed in the past couple of decades while state and local funding have decreased. Everyone is asked to do more with less, and it's our kids that are losing. The handwriting is on

the wall from our federal government, our IDEA 40% is not coming. And, if our Republican legislators win their version of ESEA, we could see districts losing Title 1 money too.

I talk with thousands of parents every year all across our nation and our problems are not unique. These same things are happening in all 50 states. But Pennsylvania has a rich history of being a trailblazer when it comes to educating kids with disabilities. Let's be that trailblazer again and show the rest of the country that all of our children are the priority. Because here's the thing, despite the landmark PARC decree and IDEA 1975, we have not improved outcomes. My child with disabilities in 2015 is looking at basically the same future as one of his peers from the 1970s—likely living in poverty, on government assistance with no job and little community inclusion. I understand that I am touching on the need for adult programs, but, our schools are the heart and souls of our communities and often set the tone for community expectations. Communities begin in the schools.

Changing the funding structure is a great step. But we all know that there isn't enough funding and we need to make that a priority too. More than anything, I wish that my son got on the regular school bus and went to the regular school and sat in the regular classroom with his peers. I don't know of a single mom who first heard those words "your child qualifies for special education" and did not burst into tears. We have a moral and societal obligation to help our most vulnerable citizens. All children have much value to offer society, if they are just given the chance and the resources that they need to be successful. It is time that we give our schools what they need to be successful.

I'll close with one of my favorite quotes, by Maya Angelou: "When you know better, you do better." We know better—we know what it takes to do right by these kids. It's time for us to do better.

ABOUT ME: I am Lisa Lightner and I have two boys in the PA Public School system. My grandmother worked as a Teacher's Aide in Mt. Carmel, PA and my mom is a retired teacher from the Allentown City School District. I work as a Disabilities Consultant and Special Education Advocate and Citizen Lobbyist. My business is A Day in our Shoes and every month over 100k parents visit my website and last year I reached over 150k Pennsylvania parents.

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