

March 13, 2017

Colorado Department of Education
Federal Programs Unit
1560 Broadway, Suite 1100
Denver, CO 80202-5149

Dear Commissioner Anthes,

As a parent of a child with learning and attention issues and as an organizer for Understood.org which is operated by the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) on behalf of 15 nonprofit partners, I am writing to provide feedback on Colorado's draft plan for the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

As you know, this is a pivotal time for education in Colorado and the decisions made today will impact the future of our state and country. Indeed, it's important our ESSA plan reflect our priorities, goals and vision for our children. Before I share with you my observations about the draft ESSA plan, I'd like to share the story of Dylan, my 18 year old son who has dyslexia, ADD and dysgraphia.

When Dylan was just 4 years old we knew that something wasn't right, so we asked his pediatrician and preschool teachers why he was struggling to hold a pencil and why noise and fabric bothered him so much? They told us "he has a May birthday, he is young, he will outgrow this". As Dylan entered elementary school he continued to struggle, and by 2nd grade he still couldn't hold a pencil nor spell his name. In spite of this, the school didn't want him tested for special education supports—instead, they asked to have him repeat 2nd grade to see if he could "catch up". By 3rd grade we saw his self-esteem diminish. We asked that the school perform a full battery of tests, they did not comply. Instead we took out a loan to pay for private testing where we found that Dylan had dyslexia, dysgraphia and ADD as well as a vocabulary of a 9th grader. How could a child who can barely spell his name have a vocabulary a 14 year old?

By 4th grade the school complied with an IEP however they didn't have the resources to help him. It wasn't until Dylan went to Hill Middle School where he received daily intervention with a Wilson specialist that he learned to decode and become fluent in reading and writing. After 7 years of trying to get help with Dylan's education, we started seeing success. We worked with Dylan's teachers, and together we had high expectations for his education, recognized his significant strengths, and used effective interventions. Today, Dylan is a freshman in college. He graduated from East High school with honors and is still working twice as hard as his peers because of his disabilities however now he now has the tools to succeed because of a methodical intervention plan.

Through my work with Understood.org and NCLD I have gotten to know many families like mine. As you may know, Understood (www.understood.org) is a free, comprehensive online resource for parents of the 1 in 5 children with learning and attention issues. NCLD – which operates and manages Understood on behalf of 15 nonprofit partners – works to empower parents and young adults, transform schools and advocate for equal rights and opportunities for the 1 in 5. Consider these statistics about students with learning and attention issues in Colorado:

- Over 38,000 students in Colorado are identified with specific learning disabilities.
- This represents 46% of all students with disabilities in our state.
- Over 83% of Colorado students with learning disabilities participate in the general education classroom for 80% or more of the school day.
- Approximately 77% of students with learning disabilities in Colorado graduate with a regular high school diploma.

Knowing my personal story – and the experiences of similar families – I am pleased to provide feedback and observations regarding Colorado’s draft ESSA plan:

- **Better Involve Parents of Students with Disabilities in the Process to Create and Carry Out the ESSA Plan:** Colorado seems to have developed a thoughtful approach to considering the very complex issues included in the ESSA plan, however it is unclear whether or how Colorado engaged with parents of students with disabilities to create the draft plan. Given that there is significant diversity in the disability population in Colorado, my recommendation is to engage with parents who have children with varying needs. So much of what is included in the ESSA state plan would impact students with disabilities, it is necessary to engage with our parent community.
- **Focus on Schools where Students are Struggling:** Our ESSA plan should include a robust definition of ‘consistently underperforming’ and create a way to support targeted support and improvement schools that puts the needs of students first. The Colorado draft plan requires a school to have subgroups large enough to report on at least three indicators and to miss the mark for students with disabilities and other groups on every indicator in order to receive supports.. This is a very limiting definition and means that schools where students with disabilities struggle in most, but not all, areas will not be given needed supports to help those struggling students. Our ESSA plan must make sure that schools quickly recognize when groups of students – like students with disabilities – are struggling and take action to help them improve.
- **Move from a Punitive to Supportive Approach:** Our ESSA plan should reinforce that the goal should be to honestly recognize when students are underperforming so that school improvements and targeted supports are provided. By providing support and resources to help schools improve, we can use school identification for productive purposes rather than punitive purposes.
- **Transparency Matters in Communicating School Performance:** It’ll be important for Colorado’s ESSA plan to prioritize transparency for parents and the community. This means that communities need to know how schools are serving students through an easy-to-understand summative school rating and information about how student groups fared on each of the accountability indicators. Colorado’s draft state plan includes three levels of school ratings, but the ratings categories do not allow schools to show when they are doing well, and the category titles may be confusing for parents. It is also unclear whether and how specific indicator information will be made available as part of those ratings. It would be helpful for the plan to explain how the ESSA ratings interact with existing Colorado performance ratings for schools.

As you know, the creation of the ESSA plan is just the beginning of the hard work that is ahead as parents, educators and policymakers will need to work together to help the law fulfill its goal of providing every student a high quality education. I hope to work with you to ensure the parent voice and perspective is an active part of future conversations. Please do not hesitate to reach out to me with any questions.

Sincerely,



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cc: Senator Michael Bennet
Senator Cory Gardner
Representative Diana DeGette
Leslie Colwell, Colorado Children's Campaign