

Dear AEA-

My relationship with you first began as I was a new mom who knew in her heart that her child was different from other children. With a regression in speech that felt like it suddenly happened over night, the first people that came to our help was the Early Access Team from the AEA. It is with this team that I learned how to interact with my own child as they were the experts, and I was very new to the world of special needs. With weekly visits to our home, or to see my son at his daycare, the Early Access Team taught me the research based skills that I needed to be the best mom I could be for my son who day after day who showed signs that further cemented our feelings that he was on the autism spectrum. It is a humbling experience to be a new mom, to be in school full time, and learn about the world of autism. As my son was going through the diagnosis process, The Early Access team led weekly coaching for myself, our family, and even daycare providers. The Early Access team watched many fearful and worried tears fall from my eyes, and the people that were once strangers, quickly felt like friends whom I looked forward to learning from. These are the people that helped me build a foundation of understanding of what my unique son needed from me in order to begin to understand how he understood the world around him.

My relationship with you did not end with the Early Access Team, in fact that was only the beginning. As my son turned 3, the strangers that became my friends, prepared me to transition my son into our public education system here in Cedar Rapids. As a frightened mother of a non-speaking child with severe autism, I was terrified of the transition to school, but you guided me through it all with your incredible staff who reassured me that my son would be in good hands. Of course you were right, when my son started school, in addition to incredible teachers, my son was placed into a unique preschool classroom that was coached by a team of AEA staff who provided my son's teachers with professional development and coaching in implementing LEAP instructional strategies into the classroom. This research based inclusive way of teaching preschoolers, provided kids with the necessary social skills that would build the foundation of how they would learn to interact with others, no matter a person's ability, by learning how to get a friends attention appropriately, sharing with others, learning to take turns, and even learning to give someone a compliment all while working on meeting Gold Standard Expectations required by the state. This type of preschool was not in every classroom, only a few at the time, but it was specifically designed for

inclusivity purposes so that all children were able to learn together. Within the two and a half years that my son was in preschool I met so many more amazing AEA staff. Autism consultants, speech language pathologist, and occupational therapists. All of these people played a key role in the development of my child with the support that they gave my child and his teachers who were responsible for a child with such unique needs as mine.

In a twist of fate, when I graduated with my undergraduate degree in education, I began teaching preschool in a LEAP classroom. It is here I met even more of your AEA staff. Physical therapists, literacy consultants, math consultants, special education consultants, speech language pathologist, occupational therapists, school social workers, school psychologists, were all people that had the knowledge of how to meet the needs of all of the learners in my classroom. These people were the people that I saw within my classroom walls, but they are not the only ones that were utilized through the AEA. Individualized learning materials were created from the graphics and printing team, engaging learning materials were checked out and borrowed from the AEA, sensory tools to help keep kids regulated and ready to learn were checked out from the AEA. To receive those services there were many staff members working behind the scenes to provide those materials that I desperately needed to meet the needs of my students.

As my career has led me to teach in a Level 3 self-contained special education classroom that serves students who all share characteristics of being on the autism spectrum. The weight of the proposed cuts, and impact that it will have on public education as a whole is frightening. I wish I could help others understand that cutting the proposed positions in the AEA will only mean that those left at the AEA will not be able to do their jobs fully without the help of those behind the scenes. Each person at the AEA plays a vital role in its day to day operations, and every employee's ultimate goal is to serve children, and help meet their individual needs.

This year I began working with one of your incredible Digital Learning Consultants as I am looking for unique ways to keep students engaged in learning using technology. With the help of this team, not only has student engagement been increased in the classroom, but it has also helped me find some of my students' learning access points and really understand all of the knowledge that my students hold within themselves that

they are not able to communicate without the help of technology. This team gave my students the ability to understand and demonstrate their learning. With the tools that I have been given and the skills that I have learned from your staff, I have been able to set up more independent learning opportunities for my unique learners to help them gain independence, but also as a strategy to combat our short staffing crisis. In so many ways your staff has saved me as a teacher, and has quite literally saved children.

The Challenging Behavior Team at the AEA has literally saved the lives of children that I know by supporting the teachers that needed further learning on how to help children with some of the most challenging behavioral needs. How could anyone overlook how each person at the AEA has such an important role? Each role matters immensely to the success of all children, because all children are general education students first and foremost aren't they?

AEA I am scared of what the implications of the proposed legislation will do to you, to us. The impact will not only be on our education system, but also our economy and communities as a whole. The inequitable opportunities for students will only further divide our community and bring a focus to what makes us different, rather than what brings us together. Public education with the support of the AEA has been able to improve equitable opportunities so that every student is able to access a free and appropriate education, the right that every child has. Without you, I am unsure how to stop the regression of our education system, and how we support the places that always brought children together, our schools.

AEA I will not give up in advocating for you, I know how badly we teachers need you, as you are our lifeline to support and student success. With challenging behaviors in every classroom, and learning gaps widening, and skyrocketing diagnosis rates for students with unique needs, support in the state of Iowa is getting smaller and smaller for all of our students. The assumption that starting salaries higher for teachers will keep them in the classroom will simply not work because no amount of money is worth feeling like you are failing your job everyday, and I know firsthand just like every other public school teacher that we simply can't do our jobs without you. AEA we will fail without you, I will fail without.

Sincerely, a grateful mother and grateful teacher for all you have done and continue to do,

Julie Scheer