

Where Are You Young (Director) Snow?

“My imagination runs wild, but when it becomes reality it scares me” - Mr. Boyd

Kim Reynolds, Director Snow, and Iowa Legislators,

My name is Josephine Blazic from Burlington, Iowa and I attend Burlington Community High School, which is serviced by Great Prairie AEA. I am speaking on behalf of myself and the Area Education Agencies (AEA). The AEAs are a vital part of the education system in more ways than one. They provide services for Iowans who can't access or afford them and also provide support systems and equipment to students to give them an education they deserve. They provided me with the services I needed from a young age to become a successful student who has signed with a college for soccer and received scholarships for both athletics and academics.

When I was just 14 months old, my family and I moved to Iowa from Michigan. The 596 mile distance from friends and anyone my family knew who could support two parents, a teenager, and a Deaf baby was much bigger than it appeared on a map. Great Prairie AEA was a fantastic resource my parents utilized to provide me with the equipment and support I needed. There was an audio booth on site for hearing tests with an audiologist who was licensed, ongoing testing to make sure I was meeting the milestones I needed to reach, and even a speech pathologist to correct a “slushy s” I had. There was even early learning support that came to our house and summer speech services were also provided when school wasn't in session. But here's the kicker, it was all free of charge. Because my parents didn't have to travel hours away for services that were less than 3 miles from my school, I didn't have to miss multiple schooldays to access support. The tools I needed to become a successful person were gifted to me by these

gracious people because it is their job and passion; to help those who cannot help themselves, either in some aspect of their life or another.

As a Deaf student who is enrolled in many honors and advanced classes, my teachers and peers aren't typically aware of the accommodations and equipment necessary for my day-to-day learning. I starkly remember being in second grade and my teacher put me right next to a radio speaker that blared the stories we would read in class. She thought that me being closest to the speaker was fulfilling the section of my IEP that stated I would "receive preferential seating in all classes" (2013-14 IEP). Whenever my teacher pressed start on the audiobooks, I was prepared to not hear or understand a single word being said. The audio was so loud I didn't process any of what was being said so I turned off my hearing aids and read the book by myself. My teacher didn't understand what my IEP *truly* meant by preferential seating and I wasn't sure how to speak up for myself. I had to learn and grow in my own confidence to advocate for myself and tell teachers what I need and also define that need. The amazing people working at the AEA helped me learn how to do just that. Kristi Notestein, Sandy Lee, Maureen Mark, Joe Hanks, and many more working behind the scenes. This bill could potentially remove amazing, hard working people like these from our education system.

The AEAs use a large chunk of their funding to support children and students with disabilities, learning disorders, and many more. How are schools and families going to pay for that same equipment and support? The reality is most can't or won't and now this bill is preventing students from receiving "an education that will best prepare them for a successful life" as is promised by our Governor ("Elevating Education for Every Student"). These services are being taken away to make the efforts made by the AEAs more "effective, efficient, and economical" as stated in the bill. But taking a majority of services provided by the AEAs will not

achieve what your bill claims to do. School districts, no matter their size, cannot replicate the services provided by the AEAs.

The statistics from governor.iowa.gov state that students with disabilities are performing below the national average. But did she stop to consider whether students and families are fully aware of the services AEAs provide? I was fortunate enough to exit special education services and no longer utilize an IEP by the second half of my sophomore year. However, the AEA personnel who have supported me from the beginning are still only a text, email, or phone call away whenever my teachers or myself have a question or need something. Thanks to the transition coordinators (funded out of general education funds) I have free guidance about what is available to me before transitioning to college. They have also been helpful at other important transitions in my life such as moving from elementary to middle school and middle to high school.

Can we also address the reality that the money freed up by cutting out the AEAs, not all of it is going to go to the school budgets. This might be the promise and that promise might be fulfilled but only with a small fraction of the money. What else is going to happen with that money? Billions of dollars won't go to public schools, but will instead be given to private schools to support the previous law enacting "school of choice".

Director Snow, it's time for you to step up and lead the Iowa Department of Education in guiding Governor Reynolds to make decisions that really are best for Iowa's kids. Decisions that are informed by the young people, families, and educators that are meant to be served and won't cause further harm to an already vulnerable population. My story is but one and I know there are several more, waiting to be shared and heard and used for making changes based on real data. I am asking you to slow down House Study Bill 542 and consider its impact from all of the angles

and not just the monetary perspective. We are the students, your future voters, and our voices matter.