

Statement of Debbie Jackson, Parent
Easton, Pennsylvania
Before the Senate on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
“Beyond Seclusion and Restraint: Creating Positive Learning Environments for All Students”
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Good morning Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Enzi and members of the Committee. Thank you for inviting me to testify before the Senate HELP Committee. My name is Deborah Jackson. I am a 44 year old single mother of my amazing 9 year old son Elijah. Elijah is entering the 4th grade in our local public school general education program. Elijah has been an honor roll student since age 5 when he entered kindergarten, consistently achieving straight A's and excelling in math and reading. Elijah's IQ registered at 116 at age 5 and I can think of no place he would rather be than at school learning as much as he can. Elijah is active in sports and participates in basketball, football and baseball. He is an active member of The Boys and Girls Club of Easton where he was awarded 1st place last year for his written and artistic expression of a poster and biography he created demonstrating the dangers of the use of drugs. He has also participated as a member of the Boys and Girls Step Team. Elijah is a very healthy and active 9 year old boy. However, this was not always the way it was...

Elijah has been diagnosed with the following conditions: Intermittent Explosive Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, ADHD Unspecified Combined Types, Bipolar Disorder and Pervasive Developmental Disorder, mainly Asperger's Disorder. The challenges he faces daily far exceed a normal day for you or I.

Elijah was born June 4th, 2003 in Atlanta Georgia. Four months later Elijah came home with me and two years to the day he officially became my son through adoption. At age 1, Elijah went to his first daycare, 6 months later it became clear that Elijah struggled in certain social settings. By age 3 Elijah had been kicked out of over 10 daycares for displays of aggression. The first initial sign of aggression was snatching toys from other toddlers or immediately reacting in a “hitting” action. As time progressed over the next year, his behaviors included stripping the walls of all hanging pictures, turning over a desks or chairs, throwing markers or pencils on the floor, throwing tantrums on the floor or screaming. Elijah's screams were incredibly loud, very high pitched shrieking noises.

Distraught and at the end of my rope I reached out to the staff at T. Karl Buice elementary school in Sugar Hill, Georgia; a general education school with a special needs program. After extensive evaluation, Elijah was determined to be eligible for special education services because of severe social developmental delays and evident tactile defensiveness tendencies. Elijah was 3 years old.

Over the next several years Elijah and I experienced many challenges with harsh discipline on bus rides, being placed in “seclusion” rooms scores of times, being restrained in basket holds, being restrained by his arms, wrists and legs by multiple staff at the same time, countless bruises from school staff, and

coming home in someone else's clothes due to sweating from physically fighting the teachers to stop them from holding him down. I received telephone messages of him screaming in the background (at school) with absolutely no other messages from school personnel. In short it was a nightmare and I no longer recognized my son. He was constantly angry and I felt like a complete failure as a parent.

The strategies to control his behavior, seclusion and restraints, were not working. In fact, they were making his behavior worse. In a final act of desperation I dialed the Administration Office of our school district and left several messages with different people looking for answers and help. It wasn't until I attended a meeting, almost 3 years ago, that different options were offered, and I began to have a shred of hope for my son.

Centennial School in Bethlehem PA is a specialized school for students with severe behavioral challenges. I was lucky to meet Kelly Price, the Director of the Elementary Program for Centennial. For me and my son, Centennial School was heaven and Kelly Price was our angel of hope. I remember the day Kelly interviewed me and my son. She spoke to Elijah on his level and engaged him in the meeting and asked him about his thoughts on what was going on with his schooling. All Elijah kept saying was "they keep holding me down." I was so impressed with Kelly and felt odd at the same time. I was not used to Elijah being treated like a little person, I was used to him being treated like a "bad kid." She was full of hope and encouragement and I remember leaving the meeting telling her "I don't know how you are going to get him back." Kelly responded that "there was definitely some deprogramming they would have to do, but everything would work out." And she was right. But I never would have believed it.

Centennial School is a "hands off" facility. Every single person that works at the school has the same belief and they fought daily for the success of my Elijah. Some of the tools they use include a point sheet for good behavior. The behaviors include very unique goals tailored for each child such as "be there, be ready," keeping ones hands and feet safe, being responsible for ones work and so on. Elijah responded very well to this system. As his points increased, Elijah would earn credits at the school store, be able to select something from the grab box, earn the privilege of a Burger King lunch and weekly awards for obtaining his goals at an awards ceremony. Centennial held Elijah responsible for his choices, both the right ones and choices he could have made better. The staff at Centennial use positive reinforcement and recognition to strengthen positive behaviors.

In many schools, so often the focus is on bad behaviors. That focus causes those behaviors to continue rather than eliminate them. Elijah had to earn and maintain a certain amount of points to participate in monthly field trips, which was a great motivator for him.

One of the most successful strategies used at Centennial for Elijah was teaching him problem solving skills. This is a strategy requires the student to talk with a staff member about what and why something happened, what choices should they have made and resolve the emotion they are feeling about the situation. Additional strategies that helped Elijah cope with his anger and impulses included putting his head down to be able to control what he is hearing and seeing, ignoring others, walking away from others and asking permission to leave a situation that is upsetting.

Centennial also has an Honor Roll Breakfast with parents and students. Centennial's honor roll is not just about good grades. Behavior is key to achieving this honor and it is not easily obtained. Elijah earned this recognition consistently beginning his 4th full quarter attending Centennial in his first year.

Elijah was enrolled in Centennial for two and a half years. I am happy to say that despite the behaviors he entered Centennial with and up to the day he left Centennial he was never restrained. The positive approaches I've described addressed the challenging behaviors Elijah had and helped him learn new behaviors so he could show all of the talents he has.

Throughout and beyond Elijah's attendance at Centennial I have been blessed and fortunate to have had Kelly Price in my life. She has been first, a teacher and a source of understanding for Elijah. She has been and remains a strong advocate for Elijah and a source of strength and support for me. She is now someone I call a dear friend. Kelly has earned the nickname "Mom #2" as she toiled long days of dedication to the cause and belief that a positive environment without restraint and seclusion works, not only for my son but for all the students and families at Centennial.

In March of this year, after two and a half years at Centennial, Elijah transitioned back to his local public school. With the transition to public school, Kelly was instrumental in training all school staff that would come in contact with Elijah. She taught them the proper tools to work with him. She labored long hours to ensure Elijah met this next phase of his life with confidence and the belief that he belongs right where he is. And so far we have all been successful.

I believe that my son Elijah is nothing short of a miracle. Elijah didn't ask for this. But through no fault of his own, he is forced daily to overcome challenges neither you nor I would ever have to think about. He has taken on the task of training his mind to see things differently than he does naturally. But Centennial has taught Elijah and me, to apply his strengths in a positive way that enables him to be successful and enjoy life. Centennial School and the staff are a Godsend to all who are blessed enough to have their paths cross. I believe with all my heart that Centennial School saved my son's life.

Thank you.