

Good morning. My name is Erin Wall and I'm from Cary, NC. Chairman Murray, Ranking member Burr and members of the Senate HELP committee, thank you for having me today and for convening a hearing on such an important topic. I have three young children ages 10, 7 and 5. My oldest son, Carter, has a learning disability which causes significant developmental delays. At the age of four, Carter entered the Wake County Public School system through NC Child Find. Since that time, he has received services including physical therapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy, and special education services.

I'll never forget that Friday in March 2020 when school as we knew it came to a screeching halt and teachers, students and parents alike were thrust into the unknown world of virtual learning. From that point until the start of the following school year Carter did not receive any of his required services.

The following school year, Wake County schools were virtual which included special education services. One of Carter's biggest challenges in school in his focus; therefore, someone had to be physically present and engaged with him during his virtual learning. Considering we had a front row seat we saw the struggles teachers and students had in trying to adapt. We observed that teachers were spending most of their time trying to focus the students and engage them in

their lessons. Students were often distracted and unable to navigate the technical aspects of being online at this young age. A virtual platform is a huge transition and for this community of children change is hard.

The therapies that Carter receives require a hands-on approach. These are interactions that often use personal touch and demonstration to achieve success in reaching his goals. Another important part of Carter's IEP is to build upon and improve his social skills. This requires the teacher to encourage and help Carter navigate these social interactions which simply cannot be done in a virtual environment.

At the same time, we also had to consider the educational needs of our youngest boys. Our middle child was a rising kindergartener, and we enrolled him in a private school which provided in-person instruction. Our youngest son also attended an in-person preschool program the same year.

It became clear to us that we could not rely on the public school system to provide in-person instruction, so we had to take matters into our own hands. We hired a tutor to work with Carter daily. In order for Carter to meet his specific educational goals we had to choose in-person instruction with the tutor over virtual learning. Because of Carter's learning loss experienced over this time

frame we are forced to continue his tutoring on a weekly basis to help bridge the gap. Fortunately, we are blessed to have the resources for this outside service; however, most parents in this situation do not. Up to this point Carter has always experienced some delays; however, that gap has grown even wider because of the length of the pandemic and continued disruptions to his learning.

Just this year, our son's school has experienced the loss of several dedicated educators. For example, Carter's speech language pathologist left his school at the beginning of December and that position was never filled and the vacancy remained until the end of the school year. Carter went seven months without speech services. On multiple occasions I was reassured that they were working diligently to fill the position and that Carter was owed compensatory services. However, not only was the position not filled he did not receive any compensatory services during those seven months.

I also want to focus on the important role of special education teachers and what they face to care for children both educationally and mentally. Special education teachers in the State of North Carolina provide direct instruction and case management that includes paperwork, reports, and meetings. There simply isn't enough time in a school day for all the roles that special education teachers are

asked to perform. Because of all the responsibilities special education teachers are required they have very little time to work with children which is their passion.

Now is the time for teachers, students, parents and all stakeholders to come together to work on solutions and improvements. Everyone needs to take a step back and really look at our children. A lot of them are not okay. I was recently told by one of Carter's therapists that even if we think a child seems okay most of them are not. She spends most of her sessions allowing kids to talk and be heard. We need to slow down, teach the basics, stop, look, and smile at the kids and give them what they've been missing for two years. So many children entered school this past year behind, nervous, and unsure. They need to be cared for. School systems need to work closer with teachers and parents to problem solve and develop feasible and meaningful solutions.

As parents we need more support from the school to help our children at home. In brainstorming in what might be beneficial, parents need to be in collaboration with teachers to develop strategies to extend their learning at home.

In closing, the fallout from the pandemic resulted in setbacks for our children academically, socially, and emotionally. There isn't a quick fix, but I certainly hope

that we can come together to create some solutions to help us move forward.

Students, teachers and parents are crying for help. Our boys would not be where they are today if it weren't for the village of teachers and therapists that have supported and loved them along the way. We must take steps to provide support for students, teachers, and parents for the sake of everyone's future.

Thank you for your time.