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Dear Legislators, Educators, and Administrators:

We very much regret that we could not attend today's event, but we wanted to write to express our gratitude and support for the outstanding special education pre-K services that our daughter, Meira (Meh-EE-ra) Berg, has received at Mary Johnson Children's Center since turning three, and to explain why, from our point of view, the community-based provision of these services is necessary and irreplaceable.

Four years ago, on Thanksgiving Day, Meira was born at Porter Hospital, and we were surprised to learn that she had Trisomy 21, also known as Down Syndrome. This was one of the most challenging moments in our lives; we felt stunned, helpless, vulnerable, and worried, especially when, a few weeks later, we discovered that Meira would have to have open-heart surgery at two months old. We felt overwhelming love for our child, but we feared what would happen to a person with intellectual and physical challenges in the world beyond her family, the world in which children are so often judged according to milestones institutionally dictated, and grouped according to assumptions about abilities and disabilities.

The community-based services Meira is receiving have laid these fears to rest. The most obvious reason for this is that community-based services foster inclusion and understanding, both in allowing children with special needs to go where other kids go and in allowing them to do what other kids do.

We chose Mary Johnson Children's Center in Middlebury for Meira in part because of its great reputation, and in part because of its family-oriented atmosphere. We also chose it for practical reasons. We both work and the year-round, full-time childcare that Mary Johnson offers is necessary for our family. But Mary Johnson cannot provide the special education services, including occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech therapy, that are offered by the school district. The solution of having community-based services, which can be provided by the school district *at* Mary Johnson, works beautifully. Wherever they can, the specialists who come to Mary Johnson perform their services without interrupting Meira's participation in her class and her interactions with her peers. And where they need to engage with her one-on-one, they do so in such a way as to keep her feeling "at home"--close to her peers, often in the same room or the same outdoor space.

The specialists are even willing to occasionally come to our house so that we can see first-hand how they are working with our daughter and to incorporate their techniques into our family life. At Mary Johnson, the community-based team works hard to incorporate their work-often in real time-with the work Meira's class is doing in cooperation with her regular teachers. Sometimes they do this so smoothly that the other kids might not even know whom they are working with in particular. The community-based special services she receives are truly an inclusive force.

Consider what would happen to Meira if community-based services were replaced by services confined to one building-say Mary Hogan, the public elementary school in Middlebury. If she stayed at Mary Johnson, she would have to be removed from her activities with peers for extended periods four to five times a week to travel to Mary Hogan, have her sessions, and travel back. Her sessions with the special educator, speech therapist, and physical therapist would be totally disconnected from her activities at school. Her peers would view her, probably, as an outsider who had to leave frequently because of her special needs. She would truly be left out. If she moved to the Mary Hogan preschool program, she would have to join another program every day at 2:15, when the Mary Hogan program ended, and she would have to join a completely new program for the summer. For a child with special needs, who depends upon familiar routines and surroundings, this could be devastating, and she would "belong," perhaps, nowhere in particular.

Now, suppose the practical problem of the 2:15 closing time were magically solved. Suppose the public pre-K hours could be extended, so that Meira could stay until 4:45, as she can at Mary Johnson. Even then, if community-based services were confined to one building, the public pre-K might well become the place where kids with disabilities go-a place avoided by parents of kids without disabilities and the means to pay for private childcare. This would be a formula for segregation-bad for Meira who loves and appreciates her peers at Mary Johnson, and bad for her peers at Mary Johnson, who love and appreciate her and get to learn, from a very young age to include, welcome, and benefit from people different from them.

To be clear, we are not proponents of "school choice" when it comes to elementary and secondary education. We plan to send our daughter to Mary Hogan, the public school in Middlebury, when she is ready for kindergarten. But pre-K is different. Pre-K is often-and often should be--more than school, particularly for kids with special needs, who tend to develop their sense of themselves and their places in their families a bit later. For Meira, as in fact for many other children her age, pre-K serves as a continuation of their home-away-from-home place of care. Kids at Mary Johnson can be there from infancy; Meira joined later, but she was comfortable there-as were we-precisely because the place feels like home; it has the loving atmosphere that we were looking for. We view it as an extension of our home, a place where Meira can develop a sense of identity deeply connected to family.

We see community-based service for Meira as the natural and logical successor to the early intervention she received from infancy, brought to her by a team of early interventionist specialists,

including an occupational therapist, a physical therapist, and a speech therapist who came to our home and to Meira's at-home place of childcare, immediately getting to know Meira, her particular needs, her parents and their ways of parenting, her childcare provider, and the opportunities for learning that existed in her own environment. The early intervention team recognized and encouraged the attitude we expressed to each other the day we brought Meira home: that she would thrive if we communicated to her every day that we saw her as perfect just as she was, never assuming anything she wanted to do, or any group into which she sought inclusion, was beyond her.

So does the pre-K special education team, organized as it is for community service. This way of doing things is empowering. It shows respect for Meira and for her parents' attitude and goals, and it shows this respect not just in words but in actions and activities creatively facilitated in the places that Meira sees as home. When a member of Meira's community-based special education team walks through our front door for a home visit, Meira expresses anticipation, excitement, and joy. We can see that she is making connections between home and school, between her education and her life everywhere she goes. The way these services are delivered communicates an understanding that if Meira is to thrive, the help provided by the the school district must, at this stage, be inextricable from the love provided by home and family and those whom parents trust when they have to work. As a result of this approach, Meira *is* thriving, and we are confident that she will grow up to be a happy, generous contributor to her community.

Sincerely,

The image shows two handwritten signatures in blue ink. The first signature is 'James Berg' and the second is 'Sheerya Berg'. The signatures are written in a cursive, flowing style.

James and Sheerya Berg