

## Dr. Christa Bialka

Chair Ortity, Chair Hill-Evans, and members of the Subcommittee on Special Education,

My name is Dr. Christa Bialka, and I am the Associate Professor of Special Education and the Director of the Teacher Education Program at Villanova University. This testimony is in support of PA House Bill 726, which if passed, will provide Pennsylvania students, both disabled and non-disabled, with a positive understanding of disability that is led by disabled people themselves.

Given my background as a former high school and middle school educator, my current role as a college professor, the parent of a child with a disability, and someone who identifies as disabled, I can provide empirical and personal reasons as to why this bill is so important.

As I'm sure you know, disabled people make up the largest minority group in the United States, with 20% of the population identifying as disabled (US Census). However, disabled students remain in the margins.

Research by Shah and colleagues (2015) shows that many non-disabled students are unwilling to engage with classmates who have a visible disability due to a feeling of discomfort, fear of being offensive, or a perceived lack of experience interacting with someone with a disability. Additionally, students with disabilities that are not immediately visible are often questioned about the legitimacy of their disability. In order for teachers to create inclusive classrooms, they need to engage students in conversations regarding disability. Additionally, disability should be positively represented in the school environment rather than added as a special focus during one or two days of the academic year.

Research I've conducted with colleagues at Villanova and Fairleigh Dickinson echo these sentiments. In a recent pilot study, we asked 50 disabled individuals to recall whether disability was discussed during their Pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade educational experiences. 43% of the sample said that disability was never discussed. Of the remaining sample, only 1 said that disability was "often discussed positively" in their elementary schooling, 1 said that disability was "often discussed positively" during their middle school years, and 3 said that disability was "often discussed positively" during their high school experience. It is noteworthy that the majority of the participants graduated from high school within the last 10 years. Although these are pilot data, they indicate that work must be done in order to increase disability awareness in schools. As one participant acknowledged, "Everyone will meet a disabled person in their

lives at some point, so it's better to start talking about it and raising awareness about it now."

I wanted to end with a personal story that gets to the heart of why this matters. Earlier this month, my eleven year old was waiting for his after school bus. As he sat, he was approached by two of his peers, who, unprompted, looked at my son and called him both "autistic" and "retarded." I want to state for the record that there is nothing wrong with being autistic, nor is there anything wrong with having an Intellectual Disability. What was wrong, however, was how these words were used as insults. My son came home in tears and asked why kids could think that it is ok to make fun of people who are disabled.

While this hit home for me personally, it's not uncommon to hear children use disability-based language to try and belittle others. There is nothing wrong with being disabled. But if we continue to leave disability out of the picture, we're never going to get to a place where children can ask genuine questions and learn about people who may look or talk or act differently than they do. It's also been said that "You can't be what you can't see." Disabled kids need to see themselves positively represented in the classroom so they understand that they are capable of great things.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this important piece of legislation.

Respectfully submitted,



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