



July 15, 2020

The Honorable Chris Murphy
136 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Maggie Hassan
324 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Chris Van Hollen
110 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Sens. Murphy, Hassan, and Van Hollen:

On behalf of Autism Speaks, I am writing to express our support for S.4100, the *Supporting Children with Disabilities During COVID-19 Act*. We thank you for your leadership in introducing this legislation to improve educational supports for our nation's students with autism and other disabilities in this extremely challenging time.

Autism Speaks is dedicated to promoting solutions, across the spectrum and throughout the life span for the needs of individuals with autism and their families. We do this through advocacy and support; increasing understanding and acceptance of people with autism; and advancing research into causes and better interventions for autism spectrum disorder and related conditions.

The number of school-age children with autism served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is significant and growing. According to the *41st Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2019*, in 2017 students with a diagnosis of autism constituted about 10% of all students served under IDEA ages 3-21 – the 2nd-most prevalent disability category among children aged 3-5. Moreover, “between 2008 and 2017, the percentages of the populations ages 6 through 11, 12 through 17, and 18 through 21 served under IDEA, Part B, that were reported under the category of autism all increased. Specifically, **the percentages of these three age groups that were reported under the category of autism were 86 percent, 148 percent, and 163 percent larger in 2017 than in 2008, respectively.**” It is important to note that these figures do not include the category of developmental delay, intellectual disability, or students with



multiple diagnoses -- so the prevalence of students with autism is likely even higher.

As noted in the bill, **students with autism and other disabilities have been disproportionately impacted** by the disruptions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. We have heard from our families across the country about the challenges they've faced accessing distance learning, related services, and community supports. While all students have been displaced by the effects of the coronavirus, students with autism have missed more than class time – the lack of in-person instruction and related services like speech, occupational, and behavioral therapies has caused widespread learning loss and skill regression. Furthermore, because the bulk of the investment in special education is made at the state and local levels, these services are significantly impacted by the shortfalls in state budgets and the incidental costs of ensuring health and safety at the local level. We believe the \$11 billion allocated to States in this legislation will go a long way to easing the financial burdens felt by schools and help them meet their service commitments to students with autism and other disabilities.

Since schools began closing in March, **Autism Speaks has championed bipartisan efforts to promote safety, recovery, individualization, equity, opportunity, and legal protection for the students we serve**, and we were pleased to note that S.4100's provisions align with the bipartisan priorities laid out by Sens. Murphy and Cassidy in April. Only a few days prior to the announcement of those principles we [applauded the leadership of Reps. Smith and Doyle](#), chairs of the Congressional Autism Caucus, who moved to advance autism priorities in future COVID-19 legislation – including financial bolstering of IDEA, the Assistive Technology Act, and other educational supports at the state and local levels. We appreciate your recognition of those priorities in the *Supporting Children with Disabilities During COVID-19 Act*, directing funding for those purposes.

Thank you for your leadership in introducing such an important bill to benefit families, school systems, and school personnel across the country struggling to navigate the uncharted waters of reopening during a global pandemic. The *Supporting Children with Disabilities During COVID-19 Act* will provide much-needed support to our educators and communities, and we look forward to working with you to advance this critical legislation this year. If you have any questions, please contact bartholomew.devon@autismspeaks.org at 202-955-3111 x17808.

Sincerely,

Angela Timashenka Geiger
President and CEO, Autism Speaks

autismspeaks.org

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