



## Massachusetts Down Syndrome Congress

TO: Members of the Education Committee  
FROM: Maureen Blazejewski, M.Ed., Education Director, MDSC  
RE: **SB. 314 - An Act to Improve Augmentative and Alternative Communication Opportunities for Children with Disabilities**  
DATE: June 17, 2015

The Massachusetts Down Syndrome Congress (MDSC) is a non-profit organization established in 1983 representing more than 5,000 people with Down syndrome in the Commonwealth.

Today, with access to innovative health care, early intervention, and best practices in education, individuals with Down syndrome can contribute to their communities in meaningful and fulfilling ways.

We are an organization that is committed to promoting best practices in inclusive education. We have strong relationships with families, teachers and school district administrators. Today I am here to speak to bills that our organization has identified as priority legislation for our organization. We strongly support Senate Bill 314, An Act to Improve Augmentative and Alternative Communication Opportunities for Children with Disabilities, because of the significant, positive, educational impact we see this bill having on our community.

As the MDSC Education Director, my primary focus is to support the development of best practices in classrooms to support students with Down syndrome, and other disabilities. In 2015, classroom instruction is designed around curriculum standards that require students to demonstrate their competence by *communicating* their level of understanding through either written or verbal expression. Immediately, this creates a barrier for students who do not have the skills required to communicate through these means. Luckily, advances in technology have provided ways for the thoughts, feelings and personalities of our students to be expressed through alternative systems.

I can personally speak to how imperative it is that every educator who works in our public schools have access to training around the effective use of these systems. Four years ago I was supporting a kindergartener with severe apraxia. This student spent his day in a classroom where his speech was unintelligible to both his teachers and the other students. Not surprisingly, he expressed frustration with his inability to be understood through oppositional and disruptive behavior.

At an evaluation meeting, the team unanimously agreed that we needed to engage with the district Assistive Technology Specialist to design an alternative communication system for him using a portable device.



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We soon realized that not one of the teachers who worked with this student on a daily basis had any experience with supporting a student who required this level of communication support. We realized that we were unable to help him generalize the skills he was learning once a week with the technology specialist to the classroom where the goal was for him to effectively interact with other teachers and students.

We scrambled, and determined that one of us would consult with the AT specialist, and the rest of us would receive training from our co-worker on the fly. The results were that the implementation of this portion of the students program was far less effective than it should have been, and the student continued to have disruptive behaviors in the classroom. By the time we were able to develop our skills enough to make sure that this student's needs were met, we were working with a child who associated school with the feeling of being a failure.

In our 21<sup>st</sup> century classrooms, teachers need to *enter into* their practice with the experience and skills that are required to support **all** students. The law states that all students should be given access to the least restrictive environment, yet only a few professionals actually have the training and expertise to execute a meaningful and effective inclusion program. All teachers need to possess the skills that will allow them to *effectively* support students with complex and unique communication needs interact within their communities in a meaningful and reciprocal way.

On behalf of our entire organization, and as an educator committed to high quality educational programming for students with disabilities, I thank you for taking the appropriate steps in ensuring a timely approval of this very important bill.

For further comment, I can be reached at 781-221-0024 X 301 or [mblazejewski@mdsc.org](mailto:mblazejewski@mdsc.org).